ANC

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

## SCIENCE FICTION

AUG.-SEPT.
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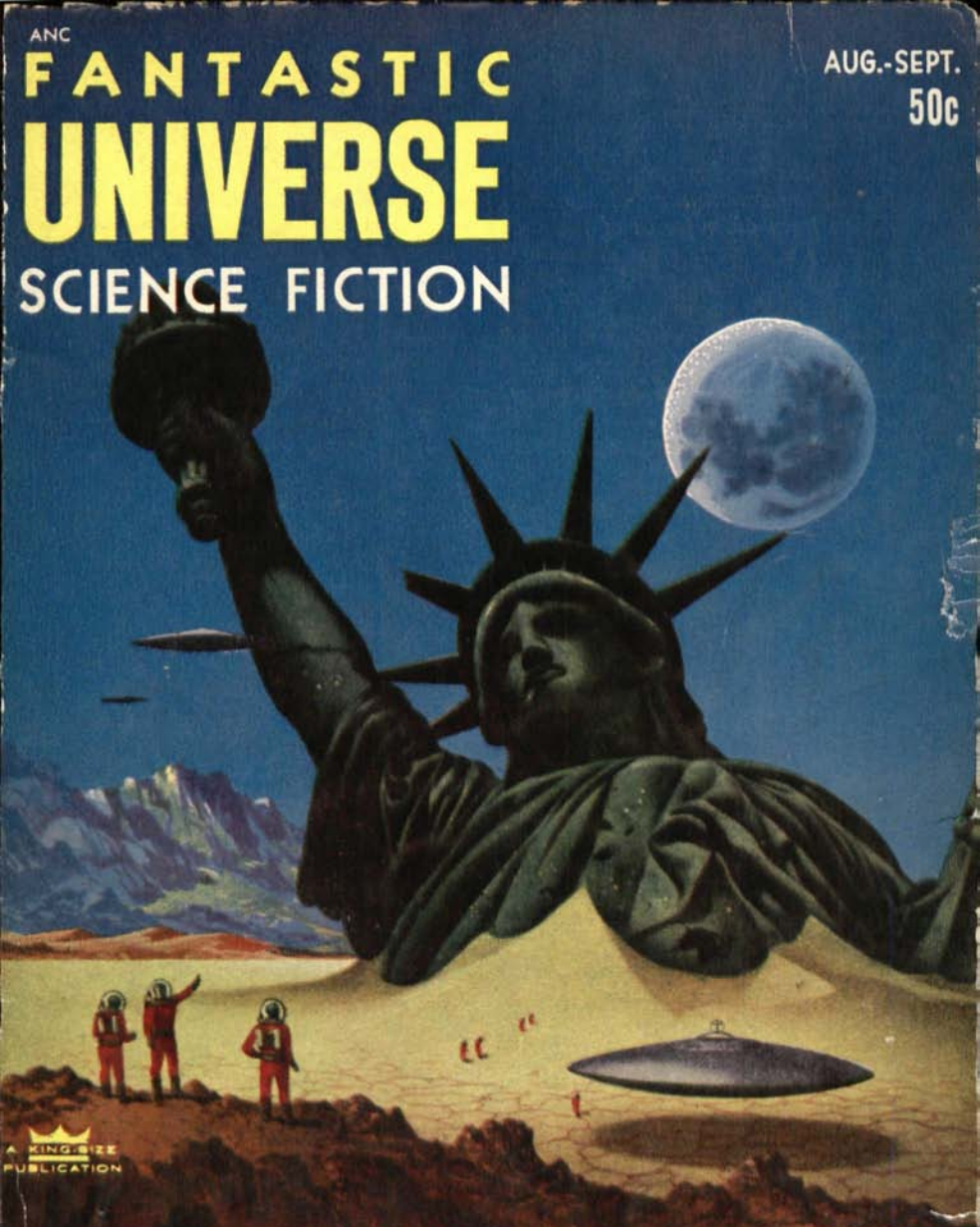


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POUL ANDERSON • RICHARD MATHESON • ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

**ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW**

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## THE INVISIBLE LINE

*One of the toughest problems confronting an editor in the science-fantasy field is the determining of the exact dividing line which separates science fiction from other forms of fantasy. For it is conservative to estimate that as many variations exist as readers. In fact certain readers seem to have several such definitions, depending upon the subject treated in each story.*

*Many people, some of them quite important, have tried to tape this elusive border. One, for instance, has called science fiction "the other side of the if"—which surely is as applicable to the gauziest fairy tale as to robotics or other "heavy" science. Another has defined it as "fantasy in a tight girdle"—which is a trifle too vague to mean much of anything.*

*One well-known stf authority has decided that science fiction is extrapolation upon a provable scientific base—which is all right until an author delves into such indefinables as extrasensory perception or time-travel, both of which belong in stf.*

*Another, equally noted, says simply that science fiction is something you believe, fantasy is something you don't.*

*Which seems to throw the problem right back to the individual reader and writer—neither of whom seems to mind shouldering the responsibility according to his own definition. Which in turn tosses it right into the editor's capacious lap.*

*We are inclined to go along with the authority who claims that stf is what you believe while fantasy is what you don't. But while trapped in the magic of a well-conceived and well-written story, we have found ourselves believing some highly unusual items.*

*For instance, that Martians are fairies (THE BROKEN RECORD), that aliens may right now be posing as reputable scientists (THIS IS KLON CALLING), that natives of Venus have blue skins (WHAT PRICE VENUS?) or that our world is strictly fiction (THE DISINTEGRATING SKY), to name but a few.*

*Which is why we aren't attempting to draw the line between science fiction and fantasy at all in FANTASTIC UNIVERSE. We know what we like and we're printing same—and we only hope you like it too.*

*—The Editor.*

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# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# the mighty dead

*by William Campbell Gault*

**On its surface the choice was an easy one—Doak Parker's career in Washington against a highly suspect country girl he had just met.**

DOAK PARKER was thinking of June, when the light flashed. He was thinking of the two months' campaign and the very probable probability of his knocking her off this week-end. It was going to be a conquest to rank among his best. It was going to be . . .

The buzzer buzzed, the light flashed and the image of Ryder appeared on his small desk-screen. Ryder said, "Come in, Doak. A little job for the week-end."

*No,* Doak thought, *no, no, no! Not this week-end. Not this particular triumphant looming week-end. No!* He said, "Be right there, Chief."

Ryder was sitting behind his desk when Doak entered. Ryder was a man of about sixty, with a lined, weary face and a straggling mustache. He nodded at the chair across the desk from him.

Ryder depressed a button on his desk and the screen beyond him began to glow. Ryder said, "An electronic transcript of a phone call I received this morning from former Senator Elmer Arnold. You know who he is, I guess, Doak."

"Author of the Arnold Law?" Doak smiled. "Who doesn't?"

Then the image of former Senator Arnold came on the screen. He

*What would it be like to live in a world which has conquered the near planets but abolished all literature? Bill Gault gives us a look at a world like this—in a not too distant future which finds all our pressure groups united to rule the roost.*



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didn't look any more than a hundred and ten years old, a withered and thin lipped man with a complexion like ashes. He began to talk.

"Ryder, I guess you know I'm no scatterbrain and I guess you know I'm not one to cry wolf—but there's something damned funny going on in the old Fisher place on the Range Road. You better send a man down here, and I mean quick. You have him contact me."

The image faded, the rasping voice ceased. Doak sighed and looked at his nails.

"Senile, you're thinking?" Ryder said quietly.

"I wasn't thinking at all, Chief," Doak said.

"Not even about that new one, that June?" the Chief asked, smiling.

Doak looked up, startled. "Is there no privacy? Are there no sanctuaries?"

"Not from Security," Ryder said. "But don't be disturbed. There's no law against *that* yet excepting some of the old ones—and who has time for the old ones?"

"As long as we're being frank," Doak said, "he mentioned the old Fisher place and a road as though you should know them. Friends of yours?"

"Friends? That's our home town. Senator Arnold was very instrumental in my Department climb." Ryder paused. "And no crackpot."

"I'll buy that," Doak agreed. "He was the man who first saw the power in combining pressure groups. He surely made some strange bedfellows."

"Any lobbyist would be a strange bedfellow, I've been told," the Chief answered. "The Arnold Law has saved us one hell of a lot of work, Doak, and saved the Department money."

"Yes, sir," Doak said. "I'm to understand this couldn't be put off until Monday?"

Ryder nodded.

"And no other Security Officer would do?"

"No other."

Doak rose. "Anything else—*sir?*"

Ryder smiled. "Just one. As a guess, what do you think it is, in the old Fisher place, on the Range Road?"

"Readers," Doak answered, "or why would the—uh, Mr. Arnold be so worried."

Ryder chuckled. "I can see them now, in the curtained room, huddling over an old railroad timetable. I think your guess is sound, Doak." He rose. "And there'll be other week-ends. That girl can wait. She isn't going to spoil."

"But *I* might explode," Doak said. "Well, it will be triple-time. That's some consolation. Enough for a new video set—I need one in the bathroom."

It was still a half hour to quitting time and Doak went back to his desk. He sat there, trying to remember the history of Senator Arnold. It was all on the tape in the Biography Center, he knew, but he didn't want that much information.

*Subversive* kicked around in his memory and the phrase "free press." And then he remembered the Cen-

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sors. The religious, the political, the scientific, the capitalist, the communist, the ridiculous and the absurd.

Arnold had unified the Censors and they had made strange bedfellows. For where one bit of ink and paper might be anti-Christian, the next might be anti-anti-Christian and the next anti-anti-anti—ad absurdium. And sex? Where couldn't one find sex in print, even among the prissy writers? For wasn't a large part of it boy meets girl? And they didn't meet to exchange election buttons—that much was certain.

Well, there were the P.T.A. and the N.A.M. and the fine if disguised hand of the Lenin lovers and the S.P.C.A. who didn't like dogs to play a sub-human part in the world of letters. All these, fighting each other, until Senator Arnold came forth.

The Senator had never enjoyed a favorable press and had a habit of saying things that looked silly, three years later, in print. The Senator was the new spokesman for the Censors.

And those who loathed sex or Christians or Republicans or Democrats or the Big Ten or the small snifter were unified under this noble man who read with his lips.

They were for him. And they established the biggest lobby ever to crawl out of the woodwork in Washington. They had their day.

The printers fought a little but were offered jobs in Hollywood. The paper manufacturers were promised all the government map-work plus a new sheaf of picture magazines. The publishers were all rich and ready to retire anyway.

The writers? They were disorganized because some were rich and some weren't, the game being what it was, and the difference in viewpoint between a rich and a non-rich writer makes McCarthy and Malenkov look like brothers.

*There shall be in that area of the galaxy under American control no material of a literary or non-literary, educational or non-educational, pertinent or impertinent nature, which is printed, written, enscribed, engraved, mimeographed, dupligraphed, electro-graved, arti-scribed, teleprinted . . .*

That wasn't the exact wording, but close.

Simple enough—how can there be subversive literature if there is no literature?

There were still sex, Democrats, Lenin lovers, some religion and two Republicans (on Venus). There was, of course, no Post Office Department, nor need for any.

On Connecticut Ave (S.E.) there was a girl named June waiting for a call from Doak. She had been in a negative frame of mind for two months, but the week-end ahead had shown promise of bringing matters to a head and maybe, considering everything, well, what the hell . . .

Doak looked at the newsscreen over the water cooler and saw, *Stormy and some rain. Temp. 93. 1730.*

A gong sounded.

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The other wage-slaves rose with assorted sighs, looking forward to the week-end. Doak dialed June's number.

His outside screen lighted up and there she was, her hair in curlers but luscious as a peach. "Hi," she said. And then frowned at the seriousness of his smile.

"Look, June," he said, "I—I've got to go out of town."

"I'll *bet*," she said.

"So help me, kid; it's . . ." Well, he couldn't say what it was. "I'll phone you, though, as soon—"

His screen went blank. He dialed again, and again. The screen stayed blank.

Ryder came out from his office, his hat on, looking weary. He managed a smile for Doak. "You'd better get to the cashier before he closes, if you haven't already."

"Yes, sir," Doak said. "Dubbinville, wasn't it?"

"Dubbinville," Ryder said. "My old Wisconsin home. You'll find it *beautiful this time of the year.* You'll love it, Doak."

"Yes, sir," Doak said.

The cashier was just getting ready to close when Doak came to the window. "Week-end trip," Doak said. "Secret."

"How much?"

Doak faced him squarely. "Two thousand."

The cashier seemed to wince but Doak's gaze didn't relent. He was only three years behind in his taxes now and this extra moola on the swindle-sheet could bring him two months closer. Anyone who was only two years behind on his taxes was considered a very solid citizen.

The cashier reached down to pull up four packets of twenties. "Well," he said quietly, "it's not *my* money." He tossed the two thousand out to Doak and yawned. "Remind me about it Monday if I forget, will you? I'm not much good the end of the week."

*Or any other part of the week,* Doak thought. He said, "If I'm back, Monday. If I'm not I'll scream for more."

"You do that well," the cashier said and reached up to turn off the light overhead.

It was hot outside. The sun seemed to be imprisoned in the white corridor that stretched for miles between the government buildings and the ashment of the parking lot glittered like broken glass.

From the mines of Mars the ashment came, the best paving surface known to man. And what was Mars but mines? With all their grand talk, who wanted to leave Mother Earth? What was Venus but a sanctuary, a vacation spot, and what was Mars but mines? When a big cog like the Chief could send a lonely man all the way to Dubbinville because of a neighbor's summons, how could they expect little cogs to grow up to galactic thinking?

Dubbinville and the heat of a Wisconsin summer—and June waiting in the apartment on Connecticut (S.E.). Doak swore quietly and

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thoroughly and stepped into the oven that was his Chev.

The cooling system started with the motor and the interior was comfortable by the time he pulled into the stream of home-bound traffic. It was a fourteen-lane highway and jammed to the curbs.

There were only two signals in eight miles but traffic moved in fits and starts at this time of day. He could see the first light when he was a hundred yards from it and was sure he could make it.

But it turned amber when he was still fifteen yards from the corner and the force-field actuated his traffic-servant and he heard the brake control click. Well, it avoided accidents but it sure as hell was rough on brake linings. He skidded to a stop.

Cars, cars, cars for miles. And the glittering ashment and all the boys and gals going home to plot the week-end. No magazines, no books, no papers with their social columns, so the girls would be out and looking around.

And the men would be out and looking around and what more did you need?

The light changed and his brake was released and he moved out at the head of his line, thinking about Dubbinville, trying to imagine it, some hamlet tucked away in a Wisconsin hill, dreaming of yesterday. Great, fine, dandy!

In his apartment all his video sets yammered at him and he stopped in the doorway, staring. They should have turned off when he'd thrown the master switch this morning.

In the hallway, he checked the switch, and it read *off*. Must be shorted . . .

He went from dinette to kitchen to bedroom to living room, turning off each set individually. All of them had the same program, Milton Berle IV. He liked that better than wrestling though not much.

In his chrome and plastic kitchen he dialed June's number.

Her hair wasn't in the curlers. It was golden and braided and high on her classic head. She said, "Your picture isn't coming through. Who is this, please?"

Doak said in a falsetto, "Guess."

The screen went blank.

Doak snapped the video switch to *on* and dialed Lateral-American. A brunette with vivid blue eyes came into view.

"A priority to Dubbinville, Wisconsin, first trip possible," Doak said and gave her Security's code number.

"Dubbinville?" she said and frowned. She consulted a station box out of his view and looked up again. "You'll have to take surface transportation from Milwaukee. It's only about twenty miles from there in Waukesha County."

"Good enough. And when's the first to Milwaukee?"

"At nineteen hundred, ramp eighty-seven. Kindly pick up your ticket at Booth sixty-two." The screen went blank.

The ticket wasn't really though the name had persisted. The 'ticket'

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was a coin. Doak looked in his refrigerator and there was nothing worthwhile in there. He'd eat at the airport.

He looked at the phone and decided against it. He went into the bedroom and threw some shirts and socks and a pair of clean pajamas into his durapelt bag.

Dubbinville—and June out looking around. What a lousy deal!

II

The great ship lay sleekly quiet under the slanting sun, the passengers like ants measured against its giant hull. Clink, clink, clink went the coins into the counting box, the light over each seat going on with the clink of the coin.

Then they were seated, the lights all on, and the tractor was pulling the giant to the channelled runway, guarded by the blast walls.

*Milwaukee, here I come.*

The whirr of the rolling wheels, the reverberations from the blast walls, a crescendo of sound, and they were free of earth. An accelerating, effortless flight, a faint tremor as they passed the sonic barrier, then no sensory impressions at all.

Flight as free as the wind's passage but more silent. Through the visacrys windows a blur of blue-green. Speed without strain, power without tumult.

Doak relaxed and for the first time since the Chief's summons he wasn't thinking of June. He was thinking of Man, from the cave to Venus, from the wheel to free flight. And something out of his childhood memory came to mind.

*Studious let me sit*
*And hold high converse with*
*the mighty dead*

Where had he heard that? Some Scotch poet, it must have been, for his mother recited only the Scotch poets. *Studious let me sit*—in front of a video set, to watch the wrestling?

*And hold high converse with the mighty dead*—not in this world where there was only tomorrow, not in this world of no books. There were no writers on television—they had no need to attract an audience. They *had* an audience. An audience that would watch wrestling would watch anything.

So the ad men took over the duties of the semi-writers who had prepared the radio programs. Ad men offended nobody, even those with denture breath. That could be cured and so could acne, B.O., straight hair and seam squirrels.

*Hey!* he though suddenly. *Watch where you're thinking, Doak Parker.*

A government man, a Security Officer, he straightened in his seat as the stewardess came along the aisle.

She smiled at him, "Everything all right, Mr. Parker?"

"Dandy," Doak said. "Great, fine! Why?"

She paused, disconcerted "I beg your pardon?"

"Why shouldn't everything be all right? Lateral-American, the skyway to the stars, right?"

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She smiled. "Absolutely correct."

"*And* Milwaukee," Doak added. "Do you only handle the earth runs?"

"Until next year," she said. "I'm new."

"I'm old," Doak said. "Is there anything to drink on board?"

"Water, Mr. Parker."

"I'm not *that* old," he said.

She glanced at her watch. "We'll be in Milwaukee in six minutes. And that's the beer town."

But he had no time for a glass of beer. The limousine took him to the elevated station and the last car for Dubbinville was leaving in three minutes.

It was a nine-minute trip. He'd picked up an hour, coming west, and used but thirty-three minutes. It was still only seven o'clock when the huge elevated car hissed to a stop in front of the Dubbinville station.

There was a smell to the place, a smell of sun-warmed grass and fruit blossoms, of lilacs and quiet rains. Doak stood on the platform, surveying the winding main street leading up into the gentle hills. People on porches and teen-agers in front of the drugstore. A reddish-brown setter padded past on some secret business of his own.

There was no whiz, no whir, no clank, no squeal, no grind. This was Dubbinville, U.S.A.

The station agent was picking up a pair of film boxes, as Doak walked over. He smiled at Doak. "Beautiful evening, isn't it?"

"It certainly is. Is there—a place to stay in town, a hotel?"

The station agent shook his head. "No hotel. But you could stay at Mrs. Klein's. She takes in boarders." He pointed with a bony forefinger. "That grey house with the blue shutters, right on the curve there."

"Thank you," Doak said. "What's the population here?"

"Around eight hundred, last census, though we had a couple families move in since then. Hasn't changed much the last hundred years."

"Retired farmers, mostly?" Doak asked.

"Mmmm, I guess. Just—people."

People . . . Which meant nothing and everything. Doak had turned away before he remembered. Then he turned back. "Oh, yes, and Senator Arnold? Where does he live?"

"Big house, over the hill," the agent said. "Only big house around here—you can't miss it. Got a high stone fence all around it and two vicious dogs. God knows what he's scared of." This was a different man from the one who had remarked on the beauty of the evening.

"Thanks," Doak said. "Thanks again."

Political resentment—or some local feud? Doak went along the platform to the single step that led to the street.

There was a breeze from the east, cooling the warm air. He turned in at the drug store and could scarcely believe his eyes.

Bent wire chairs and marble-topped tables with bent wire legs. No toasters, video sets, geiger

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counters, ray guns or portable garbage detergents.

But dim and cool and with a high marble fountain. "A lime-ade," Doak said, "with a sprig of mint."

The man behind the fountain wore a blue jacket over his white shirt. He had a thin face and a high-domed head and intelligent blue eyes.

Doak sat on one of the high wire stools and lighted a cigarette. "Hot day, was it?"

"Hot enough. But we get the night breeze. Stranger in town?"

"From Milwaukee," Doak said. "Out to visit Senator Arnold."

"Oh." The man set the drink in front of Doak.

"Trying to talk him into leaving some money to the University," Doak added. "Guess he's a pretty hard man to get money from."

"I hear he is. I wouldn't know about it. He—doesn't shop in town."

The drink was freshly flavorful, cool as springwater. Doak rubbed the beaded moisture with a thumb. "Pretty town," he said. "Pretty country around here."

"Peaceful," the man agreed. "I've never been anywhere else, so I couldn't judge it right, I guess—but then I've never had the urge to go anywhere else, so it must be all right."

"These days," Doak said, "a man doesn't need to go anywhere else. They bring the world right to you."

"I guess. Hear they're having a hard time getting Venus populated. I guess people aren't as rootless as the planners figured."

By "the planners" the man undoubtedly meant THAT WASHINGTON CROWD. Doak finished his drink and went up the street to the grey house with the blue shutters on the curve.

There was a woman sitting on the front porch, a short and heavy woman with dark hair and brown eyes. She smiled at him and said, "Good evening," without rising.

"Mrs. Klein?" Doak asked and she nodded. He said, "The station agent told me you rented rooms and served meals. My name is Doak Parker."

"A pleasure, Mr. Parker. If you'll go through the living room and take that door at the east end of it, you'll come to a hall. The room at the back of the hall's the one, if you'd like to look at it." She didn't move from her chair.

He went into the dim living room and through the door and down the hall. A mahogany bed with a patchwork quilt for a spread, a mahogany dresser and a huge wicker chair, upholstered in a bright chintz. It was a chintzy house.

He looked out the back window and saw a neat lawn, bordered with flowering shrubs. He put his grip on the floor and came back to the living room.

There were windows along the front of this room and they were open. He could see Mrs. Klein in her chair and a girl standing next to her.

There was no reason for him to pause but he did. He'd heard Mrs.

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Klein say, "Another meeting tonight, Martha?"

"Yes." The girl's voice was defensive.

"Why—why, Martha? Don't you realize the danger of—oh, Martha!"

"Mother, please. There's no danger. We're careful."

Doak coughed and walked out again onto the porch. The girl standing there was as dark as her mother but slim and long-legged and vividly beautiful.

Mrs. Klein said, "My daughter Martha, Mr. Parker. You liked the room?"

"It's fine," he said and to Martha, "How do you do?"

"How do you do, Mr. Parker? You've had supper?"

He nodded and lied, "In Milwaukee. I'm up here to try and get some money out of Senator Arnold. I wonder if this might be a good time to see him."

Mrs. Klein said, "I doubt if anytime is a good time to see him. You're a salesman, Mr. Parker?"

"No, no. It's philanthropy I'm concerned with. Mr. Arnold's old enough to start thinking about his benefactors."

"He'll probably leave it all to the dogs," Mrs. Klein said. "And you be careful of them, Mr. Parker."

"That I will," Doak said. "I think I'll walk up there now. Not much of a walk, I understand. Just over the hill, isn't it?"

It was the girl who answered. "That's right. I'm going that way myself. I'll be glad to show you the house."

Mrs. Klein said, "You're leaving so soon, Martha?"

"Right now. I'll be home early. Don't fret about me, Mother."

They went down the walk together, Doak and Martha, and he had forgotten June and the Department and all the girls who would be out, looking, tonight in Washington.

She walked easily at his side, poised and quiet.

He said, "Do you work in town?"

She nodded. "For an attorney. I was going to law school myself until Dad died."

"Oh," he said.

He wondered at his lack of words, and the strange sense of—almost of inferiority glimmering in him. She hadn't said anything or done anything to place him at a disadvantage but he knew this was no lass for the casual pitch.

They came to the crest of the hill and saw the dying sun low in the west. The quiet was almost absolute. About a hundred yards on the other side of the ridge was a road leading off to the south. On the right side of this road was the big house with the high stone fence.

Doak said quietly, "There's a few sentences that have been bothering me all day. I wonder if you'd recognize them. They're, 'Studious, let me sit and hold high converse with the mighty dead.' One of the Scotch poets probably."

"Thomson," she said, "from his *Seasons*." She looked straight ahead.

"I'm not sure I understand exactly what he meant," Doak said.

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"He meant—reading." She turned to look at him. "This is Senator Arnold's house, Mr. Parker. You might ask him what Thomson meant."

Her smile was brief and cool. She walked on.

Behind the fence, the dogs started to bark. In the huge gatepost was a pair of paneled doors about three feet high, the lower edges about four feet from the ground. A sign read, *Visitors, kindly use this phone.*

Doak opened the double doors and lifted the phone. As he did so a scanning light went on in the weatherproof niche. Someone said, "Yes?"

"Officer Parker of Security. I believe I'm expected."

"One moment, sir."

Silence, except for the sniffing dogs. And then the sniffing stopped and he heard the pad of their feet, as they raced for the house and the voice in the phone said, "The gates will be open soon, Mr. Parker."

They opened in less than a minute. At the far end of the gravel drive a turreted monstrosity loomed, a weathered wooden structure that had undoubtedly once been white.

It was now as ashen as the face of Senator Arnold, bleak against the skyline, set back on a dandelion-covered lawn. Behind the wrought-iron fence, to the right of the house, the dogs watched him approach.

They were German Boxers, formidable creatures and great slobberers. They drooled as he walked up to the low porch but uttered not a sound.

The man who opened the door was fat and needed a shave. He wore a shiny, duraserge suit. "Follow me, please, Mr. Parker."

## III

Doak followed him through a high musty living room into a small room off this. There was a small hynrane heater in here, and the room was stifling.

Senator Arnold sat in a wheel chair, his feet elevated. He wore a greasy muffler around his thin neck and a heavy reefer buttoned all the way up.

The fat man left, closing the door behind him. Arnold looked Doak over from head to feet and came back up. "It's about time. Your credentials?"

Doak handed over his wallet. There was, he saw, no chair in the room. Evidently, he was supposed to stand through the interview.

The old man handed the wallet back. "The place is right up that road to the south. First house, only house in sight."

Doak put his wallet in his pocket. "Just what kind of business do you think is going on up there, Senator?"

The old man seemed to spit the word. "Readers."

Doak exhaled, saying nothing.

"And maybe more," the old man said and his eyes were unholy. "Maybe—I wouldn't be surprised if they're—they're *printing* something up there." He coughed.

Sweat poured off Doak as the

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glowing hynrane heater made an oven of the windowless room.

The old man closed his eyes. "In my home town, the vermin, in my own town! They always laughed at me here but, by God, that was before the state saw fit to send me to the Senate. The last laugh's been mine. But now—right under my nose, you might say!" He opened his eyes and glared at Doak.

"Subversive reading, you think?" Doak asked.

The old man stared at him. "Is there another kind? I shouldn't have to ask that of a Security Officer. What kind of men is the Department hiring these days?"

Doak thought of something to say and decided not to. He said, "I wondered about how dangerous they were. If I'd need additional men."

"For readers? Young man, there must be some red blood in your veins. By God, if I was two years younger, I'd go along just for the joy of smashing them." He was trembling, leaning forward in his chair. "Go now, go and trap the filthy scum."

Doak went. He left the hot and odorous room and went out through the cool and odorous room to the front hall and out the front door. There his nausea quieted a little under the sun-warmed air from the east.

Behind the wrought-iron fence the dogs slobbered and watched, only their heads moving. As he went down the gravel drive to the heavy gate he was conscious of their stares and a coldness moved through him. The gates opened when he was twenty feet away.

It was growing dark and the breeze seemed stronger. On the road to the south, the Range Road, the house identified as the old Fisher place revealed one light in a first-floor room. There were two cars in the yard.

Doak turned back toward town but paused over the crest of the hill and sought cover. There was a small grove of hickory and oak to his left. He walked into their shelter until he was out of any passerby's range of vision.

Readers wouldn't be any trouble. But printers? If the old mummy was right in his guess Doak could have more trouble than one man could handle.

He put his back up against the rough bark of an oak tree and sat hugging his knees, waiting for the darkness. *Studious let me sit . . .* Oh, yes.

Printers—and what would they print? Had any poets been born since the Arnold Law, any writers? Was there some urge to write in a readerless world? In the Russian homes, he'd heard, under the machine gods, the old religion persisted, from parent to child, by word of mouth.

But writers without an audience? An art that persisted without followers?

That girl, that lovely poised girl-creature had been quick to identify Thomson and he wasn't one of the giants. If there were others with equally fertile memories, and they

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got together, it would be like a small—what was the word?—a small library.

They could write or print or type the remembered offerings of all the readers and have a book. Or at least a pamphlet.

It grew darker and he thought of June and wondered, if her memory were searched, just what would be dredged up. He'd bet it would be one word—*no.*

And now it was dark enough and he rose and made his way back over the hill, toward the Fisher place, following the field instead of the road, keeping to the tall grass, conscious of the crickets and the night breeze and the light in the first floor room of the Fisher place.

There was another car in the drive now and he could see a few people in the room. He could see Martha and next to her an aged man with a beard like snow. He went past the window and around in back of the house.

There was an unlatched rear door and he entered a dark rear hall and put on his infra-scope. Now he could see the three steps leading to an open door and he went up the steps to the kitchen. There he could hear their voices.

Martha was talking. "As Dan has told you there's nothing to fear from an injection of lucidate. It's a perfectly harmless drug with no serious aftereffects that promotes total recall. Total recall is what we need unless we get a much larger group of donors than we have presently.

"Readers are no problem. We've had more requests for our magazine than we can fill. Our biggest problem, more important than getting memory donors, is to find someone who can contribute significant original work. For that kind of man we're still searching. Or woman."

Doak moved quietly, very slowly, past the kitchen sink and along the short hall that led to the dining room. There was a swinging door here, closed, but the upper half was glass and he could see through the dining room into the lighted living room. He took off the infra-scope glasses.

Nine people were in the room, seven men and two women. The men ranged in age from about twenty-three to the old gent with the beard, who seemed ageless. The other woman was a gray-haired lady of about fifty with fine features and a rich contralto voice.

She was saying, "I'd like to be the first to go under the lucidate."

Next to a maple fireman's chair a man who looked about forty nodded and the woman came forward to sit in the chair. He had a hypodermic in his hand and she extended her arm.

On the far side of the room Martha was wheeling up a small recording machine.

Now the woman's eyes were closed and the others sat back, watching her. The contralto voice was clear and resonant.

"'... 'tis but thy name that is my enemy
Thou art thyself though, not

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a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? that which we call a rose,
By any other name would smell as sweet . . .'"

The rich voice, the flowing rhythm, the silence—was it Burns she quoted? No—he knew all of Burns—but this was some giant of the past; this was almost up to vintage Burns.

He left his vantage point and went quietly back to the kitchen, donning his infra-scope once more. In some of these old houses there was a back steps, leading to the second floor.

Another door leading off the kitchen, another hall—and the steps.

They would undoubtedly creak. But they might not creak loudly enough to disturb that circle of mesmerized individuals listening to the contralto magic.

There was only one small creak, halfway up.

Three rooms led off a narrow hall. One held a cot and a dresser and a straight-backed chair. The second room he entered had a strange smell. A smell he didn't recognize. Ink? Was that a mimeograph machine? Something stirred in his memory, some picture he had seen of a duplicating machine somewhere. This other dingus was undoubtedly a typewriter—and this small gadget on the desk a stapler.

And here, on a small pine table, was a sheaf of four mimeographed pages, stapled together.

The heading read, *The Heritage Herald.*

That was the name of their magazine. Printers, under the technical interpretation of the law. A typewriter and a duplicating machine and stencils and ink—and words.

Shakespeare, whoever he was, and Robert W. Service and Milton and an original by S. Crittington Jones.

The original was a short-short tale about a wrestler and a cowboy and a video comedian, a space-farce. There was a piece headed *Editorial* by Martha Klein. It had a sub-heading—*For Those Who Are Willing To Fight.*

It was a stirring and vigorous call to arms against the Arnold Law. It was as subversive as anything Doak had seen in his Department career.

He folded the magazine, and put it into an upper jacket pocket. He went to the third room and saw the paper stacked there and the bottles of ink and new stencils.

He went back to the stairs, and quietly down them. From the living room, he heard—

"'... From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs,
That makes her loved at home, revered abroad;
Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,
An honest man's the noblest work of God!'"

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This was more like it, except for that last line the bard had borrowed. This was the true giant, and who was quoting him? It was not the contralto voice. Who?

He moved out to the kitchen and back to his vantage point. He took off the infra-scope and looked into the living room. It was the old gent, with the beard. And who else could it be? For wasn't he the cream of the lot, the most obvious scholar, the most evident gentleman? Scholarship and breeding seemed to flow from every hair in his beard.

"O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!
From whom my warmest wish to heaven is sent,
Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil
Be blessed with health and peace and sweet content!
And, O, may heaven their—"

Doak felt a stirring in him and tears moved down his cheeks and he turned, quickly and silently, and went out the back door. He was no child at his mother's knee, he was no mewling kitten—he was a Security Officer and this was subversion.

Outside the stars were bright in a black sky. He stood in the back yard, breathing heavily, ashamed at the sudden surge of feeling that had moved through him. Some streak of adolescence, he thought, stirred by the words he had remembered from his mother's lips.

He walked slowly back toward town. He could call in local help and round up the gang back there in the house. He could wash this up tonight and be back in Washington tomorrow morning. With June.

The prospect of being with June had lost its flavor somehow. And if this was a widely published magazine, he had a larger duty than merely apprehending the gang. All of the magazine's readers were breaking the law and a real operative comes in with a complete, clean case.

Mrs. Klein still sat on her front porch. "Any luck?" she asked, as he came up to sit on the glider near her chair.

"Some. I'll see him again tomorrow."

Her voice was dry. "One of our most prominent citizens, the Senator. The other's Glen Ryder. I guess you know who he is."

He stiffened, trying to see her face in the dark. "Ryder? Oh, yes, in the Security Department."

"That's right. Glen isn't anything to be ashamed of really. But that Senator Arnold—my, the stories my mother told me about him!"

"I've heard," Doak said, "he was pretty wild as a young man."

"Wild?" Mrs. Klein sniffed. "Degraded would be a better word. If his father didn't have all the money in the county he'd have gone to jail more than once, that man. And then the people of this state sending him to the Senate."

Doak said nothing, staring out at the quiet night.

"Would you like a little snack?" Mrs. Klein asked. "I've some baked

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ham and rolls out in the kitchen."

"No thanks," Doak said. "I'm not very hungry. Was Glen Ryder a friend of Senator Arnold's?"

"Not until Glen went to work for the government. I don't think the Senator had any friends except those who could profit by it."

"This Ryder was something of an—opportunist?"

"If that means what it sounds like, I guess that would describe Glen. He wasn't one to overlook any opportunity to better himself and he cut it pretty thin at times."

Doak looked over but could not see her face in the darkness. He said slowly, "I guess we all have to look out for ourselves and the devil take the hindmost."

"I suppose," she said placidly. "Though it would depend on what you wanted out of life. Here in Dubbinville I think we're a little more neighborly than that."

"It's a nice town," Doak said. "A real nice town."

In front a car was stopping on the other side of the road. Someone got out from the door on the far side and the car moved on.

"That would be Martha, I guess," Mrs. Klein said. "She'll want some of that ham, I know. You may as well have a cup of coffee with us anyway."

## IV

Doak had some coffee and some rolls and ham. And some talk with both of them in the bright comfortable kitchen. They talked about the ridiculous price of food in the city and how cool the house was after the heat of the day and what was it like on Venus?

Neither of the women had ever been to Venus. Doak told them about the lakes, the virgin timber, the glareless warmth that came from the generative earth.

And about the lack of communication facilities.

"There isn't enough commerce to make any video installations worthwhile," he explained, "and the only information transmission is by amateur radio operators. But nobody seems to miss it. It's got enough vacation facilities without video."

Martha looked at him evenly. "The—Arnold Law applies there, too, doesn't it?"

Doak met her gaze. "Of course." And then, "Why do you ask?"

She smiled. "I was thinking it would be a good place to curl up with a book." Her chin lifted. "Or establish a newspaper."

He didn't answer. He took another roll and buttered it.

Mrs. Klein said, "Martha's too young to know what a newspaper is—or a book. And so are you, Mr. Parker. I say we're not missing much."

He grinned at her. "Bad, were they?"

"There was a paper in Chicago so bad you'd think I was lying if I tried to describe it to you. And all the books seemed to be concerned with four-letter words."

He carefully put a piece of ham between the broken halves of the roll. "Even Bobbie Burns? From

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what my mother told me he was quite a lad."

"He was dead before your mother was born," Mrs. Klein said. "All the good ones were, all the ones who tried to entertain instead of shock or corrupt."

Martha said lightly, "Mama's an admirer of Senator Arnold, the way it sounds."

"I'll thank you not to mention his name while I'm eating," Mrs. Klein said acidly. "And I'm not forgetting why *he* hated the printed word. But that's looking a gift horse in the mouth."

Doak sipped his coffee. His voice was casual. "Why did he hate the printed word?"

"He couldn't read anything but the simplest words. The tutors his father hired and fired to get some learning into that man! He was just hopeless, that's all."

Doak smiled. "Well, he seems to have done all right without it. I'd like to have his money."

"And his brain?" Martha asked.

"Just his money," Doak said. "And maybe I'll get some of it before I give up on him."

He happened to glance at Martha after he finished saying that. Her face was coldly skeptical and he had an uncomfortable feeling that his lie hadn't registered with her at all.

In his room, as he undressed, as he hung his clothes in the small closet, he felt the folded thickness of the dupligraphed magazine in his jacket pocket.

What more did he need? Tomorrow he'd take the first train back to Milwaukee and the first plane from Milwaukee. Here was evidence and he realized now it wasn't something he would be wise to tackle alone. A few weeks' work by a half dozen operatives and the entire publisher-reader organization would be spotted and ready for one unified move.

Local authorities were subject to local loyalties and one leak could scare off the whole organization. He could be back in Washington before noon, which would give him a full day and a half of free time, of June time. To say nothing of the nights.

Why should he hang around this whistle stop for a wasted week-end, holding kitchen conversations with the unmighty living?

But that Martha, that lovely, that proud and knowing gal . . . The crickets helped him to Dreamland.

The morning sun was bright on the quilted bedspread when he opened his eyes. There was no sound of meal preparation in the house, no dialogue. Was it early?

It was ten o'clock. Not since he was a child had he enjoyed as long and satisfying a sleep as this.

When he came out of the bathroom Mrs. Klein was in the hall. "About five minutes?" she asked.

"Make it two," he told her and winked. "I'm starving."

Martha had already gone to work. Doak sat down alone to popovers and oatmeal, eggs and Canadian bacon. And real coffee. He had an almost animal sense of well being. His decision to go back to Wash-

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ington, which had seemed so final last night, was fading under the Dubbinville spell.

After breakfast he walked down to the station and inquired about Milwaukee-bound trains.

"There's one due at noon," the agent told him. "Stops on signal. You want me to stop it?"

"That's kind of early," Doak said. "When's the next?"

"At six tonight. A local. Doesn't need a signal."

That would be soon enough. Doak left and walked slowly up the main street of Dubbinville. He was walking past the bank when the beard caught his gaze.

It was the Burns quoter of last night. He was sitting behind the biggest desk in the open portion of the bank, and there was a sign on his desk.

The sign read, *Malcolm S. Sutherland—President.*

Lordy, Lordy, Lordy—the president of the bank! That showed the strata this subversion was reaching. Didn't the man realize what a risk he was taking?

In the drugstore he saw another of the faces he had seen last night. It was the man who had administered the hypodermic. He was talking to the druggist. Doak turned and went in.

"All right, Doctor," the druggist said. "I'll have it about one o'clock. Will that be all right?"

"Fine," the doctor said. He went out.

Doak bought a package of cigarettes. "Was that Doctor Ryan by any chance?"

"No. Doctor Helgeson. I don't recall a Doctor Ryan. Doctor Helgeson's the only medical doctor in town."

"This Ryan's a Ph.D." Doak said. "Senator Arnold told me about him. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Beautiful," the druggist agreed.

Walking back to the house Doak wondered if this couldn't be handled without punitive measures being taken. The only doctor in town and the president of the bank—and they were probably only a small part of the picture. It could disrupt this town if Senator Arnold had his way.

And what was their crime? Reading. A law as stupid as the ancient prohibition law had been, pushed through a bewildered Congress under much the same conditions. Supported by a strange blend of the divine and ridiculous, the naïve and the clever, the gullible and the knowing.

Well, was it his business? *He* didn't make the laws—he only helped to enforce them. It was a logical answer and why didn't it satisfy him?

He had a job, a good job at the public trough in a woman-heavy city, a security that was as solid as his country. Why should he fret over a gang of law-breakers? Unless it was that cow-town cutie, that Martha. Unless he was so dame-happy he'd sell out the Department. That corrupt he certainly wasn't—at least, not yet.

And they weren't readers any-

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way—they were publishers. He had almost forgotten that. Inciters to violence, instigators of strife, polluters of the mind . . . Good Lord, he was beginning to sound like crack-brained ex-Senator Arnold!

## V

Mrs. Klein was shaking out a rug on the front porch. She smiled at him. "Not much to do here, for a city man, is there?"

"I'm not bored," he said, "for some reason. You have a beautiful daughter, Mrs. Klein."

"I'd feel happier about her looks if she'd marry somebody," Mrs. Klein said dryly. "Seems to me they're wasted this way."

Doak sat on the glider. What was it someone had said about marriage? Oh, yes—that it combined the ultimate in temptation with the ultimate in opportunity.

He said, "I'm surprised she isn't married. The men around here must be blind or mute."

"Oh, she's had enough offers," Mrs. Klein answered. She laid the rug over the porch railing. "But she's a fussy stubborn girl." She sat in her chair. "You a married man, Mr. Parker?"

He shook his head. "Never had the time nor the money—and besides they all said no to me."

"I'll bet. With that hair of yours and that fine head, with those eyes, I'll *bet* they said no."

"Why, thank you!" Doak said. "You have a number of good points, yourself, Mrs. Klein."

"My popovers and my coffee, maybe," she agreed. "And my figure wasn't bad, a decade or two back. But I never had Martha's looks. That's from her dad's side of the family."

"Handsome, were they?"

"Oh, yes. High falutin' people, scholars and beauties who owned half the land in the county, at one time. Old Wisconsin Germans. I'm Irish myself."

Bright scintillating dialogue, stirring the quick response. But he felt as relaxed as though he had hay in his hair. He looked out at the deserted road, at the fields beyond, at the clouds on the clear horizon. Rural summer—a quiet Saturday morning in the agricultural Midwest only nineteen minutes from Chicago.

People spoke of other worlds and here was one, nineteen minutes from Chicago. And last night, under the lucidate, the town banker had gone to another world, three hundred years away, had gone back to the magic of Burns.

A great lad for the ladies, Bobbie Burns, and a great love for the people. A poet with revolutionary leanings, all heart, a bleeder and a believer. Studious, Doak sat, on the front porch in another world.

Were the people so stupid they couldn't be trusted with words? They could be misled with words and confused and stirred to unrighteous anger. And informed with words and guided and ennobled and solaced and stirred to high destiny.

How had wrestling ever taken the place of words?

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Someone said, "Dreaming, city-man?"

He looked up quickly to see Martha standing there. Mrs. Klein had evidently gone into the house without his being aware of it.

"Dreaming," Doak admitted. "Holding high converse with the mighty dead." He smiled at her. "Through for the week?"

"Through." She took the chair her mother usually occupied. "Five and a half days of whereas and wherefore earns me a day and a half for myself. At the risk of seeming forward would you like to go swimming with me this afternoon?"

"I can't think of a better way to spend it," Doak answered. "How about transportation?"

"It's only a little over a mile. We can walk." She paused. "Or did you plan to see Senator Arnold?"

"I'd rather go swimming," Doak said.

Which they did. In the waters of Lake Memahbin, in the small cove that harbored the entire recreational facilities of Dubbinville. Doak rented some trunks there and they swam out to the raft.

There weren't too many adults in the water this afternoon but the kids were everywhere. Noisy splashing running kids—but very few of them ventured out to the big raft.

There was a park running the length of the beach and a variety of games—table tennis, horse-shoes, shuffleboard. There was a small group around the table in the grove who seemed to be just sitting.

Doak saw the beard and the lady who had quoted the unknown poet, last night. He and Martha lay on their stomachs on the raft, looking back toward the shore.

Doak said easily, "That gang in the glade doesn't seem to be having much fun."

"Solid citizens," Martha said. "That lady is the principal of the high school and the man with the beard is president of the bank. You couldn't expect them to run and shout, could you?"

Doak said nothing.

She turned over on her side to look at him. "Any luck with the Senator?"

"Not much so far. I'll get him, before Monday, though."

She stood up and he felt a stirring in him at the sight of her taut fully-feminine figure. She poised on the edge of the raft and then her tanned body went slanting toward the water.

She came up directly beneath him and splashed a handful of water into his face. "Sun worshipper," she mocked. "The trip out do you in?"

He made a face at her and she went under.

He looked over at the group in the glade. High school principal, custodian of young minds—and a reader. Worse than that, a partner in a publishing venture.

Corruption? What kind of mind would it take to believe there was corruption in that group? A Senator Arnold kind of mind. Rebellion, yes. Oh, very definitely rebellion—under the Arnold Law.

But how could—

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Somebody had his feet and he was being pulled head over toes into the waiting water. He came up spluttering to see Martha laughing at him from the edge of the raft.

He started to climb up and she dove off the further side. He went after her. Much laughter and great sport. An excuse to grab her, here and there, to feel the firm, warm smoothness of her, to quicken to the challenge of her body.

In the glade the watchers sat, missing nothing.

Doak said, "I'm not sure the solid citizens approve of your maidenly frolicking. They seem to be frowning our way."

"Studious types," Martha said, "but not necessarily disapproving."

Doak was silent, staring at the water.

"Bored?" Her voice was light.

He looked up. "I've never been less bored. Martha, I . . ." He shook his head in vexation.

"It's a little early for a pitch," she said, "though you do give it a warming amateur earnestness. Or wasn't it going to be a pitch?"

He looked at her steadily. "What else?"

"A warning maybe?" a break in the light tone.

"What kind of warning?"

It was her turn to look at the water—and to color? It seemed so, faintly, under the tan. She said, "To warn me that you're married or poor or uninterested." She looked up, smiling. "I'm such a simple country girl."

"Yes," he said. "Sure." He looked over at the watchers. "Are they friends of yours?"

"Yes." Her eyes wide and searching, her face and body taut. "Why?"

"Wondered. Am I being played for a patsy?"

Silence while she studied him. Silence while the raft gently rocked, and the world. "Patsy?" she asked.

"Forget it. You have a great charm and an unholy animal attraction for me, Martha Klein, and maybe we'd better get back to shore and have a quiet cigarette."

They had a cigarette and a hot dog with a skin on it, the first Doak had ever seen. They had grape pop and a few laughs. Fun in the sun at Dubbinville, U.S.A. Wouldn't the gang at home get a belt out of this? And where was June's bright metallic laughter being heard this golden afternoon?

They walked back to town quietly, exertion-spent, sun-calmed. They came up onto the porch, and Mrs. Klein looked from Martha's face to Doak's and frowned—and sighed.

"Fun?" she asked.

"Wonderful," Doak said. "And Martha surprised me by being able to swim. None of my other girls can swim a lick."

"Martha's no girl," Mrs. Klein said. "She's twenty-seven."

Martha laughed. "Why, mother, you'll never get rid of me that way."

Mrs. Klein said, "I almost forgot. Mr. Arnold called. Wants to see you, Mr. Parker, tonight."

"Well, maybe he is sold. Wonder how he knew I was here."

"There isn't much he doesn't

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know about what's going on in town," Mrs. Klein said. "I'd wager there isn't *anything*." She looked at Martha as she said that last.

Martha's face was blank.

"Maybe I can put it off until tomorrow," Doak said. "It's been a pretty good day up to now."

He called the Senator from the drug store in town. He told him, "Nothing definite, yet, Senator."

"Don't give me that," Arnold said raspingly. "Get up here right away, Parker."

Doak stopped at the house on the way back. He told Mrs. Klein, "I might be a little late for supper. I think I'll run up and see the Senator now and get it over with."

"We'll hold it," she said. She looked around to see if Martha was within hearing. Then, "You're not trifling with my girl, Mr. Parker?"

"Not for a second," Doak assured her. "Though I have an uncomfortable feeling she's trifling with me, but good."

Mrs. Klein shook her dark head. "Not with that sick-calf look on her face. The girl's smitten. You watch your step, Mr. Parker."

"I promise," he said. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

The hot room, the face like ashes, the cracked voice. No chair again for Doak. Arnold said, "You went up there last night, I know. Well?"

"I'll make a full report to my superior," Doak said. "I'm not permitted to discuss Department business with *anybody*, Senator."

Arnold's thin lips were open, his bony jaw slack. "Well, I'll be damned. Do you know who you're talking to, young man?"

"An *ex*-Senator," Doak answered.

"That's right—and the man who put your superior where he is. He'd still be peddling papers if I hadn't got him into the Department."

Doak said nothing.

"I could get your job in a minute," Arnold went on. "I'm a hell of a long ways from dead, Parker. You'd better wake up."

Doak had no words.

"Well, damn it, man, are you dumb? What have you got to say?"

"I've said it, sir," Doak said quietly.

For long and silent seconds, Arnold glared at him. And then he said, "All right. I'll get my report from Ryder—and your job. Now get out."

Fine, *great!* Hero Doak Parker, of Security. Lion bearder, hair-splitter, cutter-of-his-own-throat, lover of a country lass. And man without a future, it looked like now.

The dogs slobbered and watched, the gravel grated under his feet. The great gates swung open and Doak took a deep breath of the warm clean air. Why did he feel so free?

Martha was sitting on the front porch. She looked up and smiled as he came near and he stooped to kiss her.

"Hey!" she said. "Watch it, city man." But she hadn't taken her lips away for a few seconds.

From his jacket pocket he took the *Heritage Herald* and tossed it in her lap. She looked down at it for

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seconds, then up to read his face. He said nothing.

"Last night," she said, "you got it. I missed it when I went upstairs, last night, but I thought someone else might have taken it."

"I took it—last night."

Her eyes searched his wonderingly but there was no evident tension in her. Doak sat on the glider.

She said, "I was too forward to be believed this afternoon, perhaps? Did you listen last night?"

"I listened. I'm from Security, Martha—or was. I'm resigning."

"Oh? To fight the good fight?"

He nodded. "But legally—or what is known as legally. Through the pressure-group pattern. I know my way around Washington, Martha. I think; in time and with the right people behind me, I think I could—oh, hell!"

"Yes," she said. "Oh, hell! When you were swimming this afternoon we could have got this, Doak. I told them to wait. I told them I thought you had the makings of an honest man."

"Why?" He stared at her.

"I don't know why. Maybe your curly hair. I'm admitting nothing along that line, not yet, Doak. I want to see what kind of fighter you are, how much man you are."

"I wish I knew," he said quietly. "One thing I'm sure of, I'm going to enjoy the battle."

"You're going to enjoy both battles," Martha said. "And probably win both. But oh, the bastards we're going to have to fight."

He smiled and looked out at the shadowed lawn. This would be a place for the historians, the *writing* historians, Dubbinville, U.S.A. And why should a man be happy, looking forward to so damned much trouble?

*Mr. Gault has just presented us with a wholly plausible if highly terrifying view of a reasonably near future. Such things could, conceivably, come to pass. And prophecy, from the time of Jules Verne to the present, has long been one of the several spinal columns of science fiction. Yet is it possible for anyone to predict an unvisited future? We are inclined to think not. Gadgetry to come, as repeatedly demonstrated by Verne, is easy. But no one yet has been able to tell what human beings are going to do from day to day, much less years and years ahead of time.*

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# full circle

*by . . . . Richard Matheson*

Growing up promises to be as disillusioning a process in times to come as it is today—unless this author is wrong. We hope he is.

THE CITY EDITOR called him in. "Here," he said. He tossed a ticket across his desk. "For tonight."

Walt picked up the ticket. "Are you kidding?" he asked.

Barton rested his head on his hands. He looked mildly quizzical. He said, "Thompson, do I strike you as the kidding sort?"

Walt grinned. "Yeah," he said, "like Macbeth."

He started out. At the door, he turned. "How shall it be?" he asked. "Straight? Humorous? Allegorical? Historical-pastoral? Scene undivided or poem unlimited?"

"You may get the hell out of here," Barton said.

As he moved through the press room, Walt looked at the ticket again. *January 25, 2231. Terwilliger's Living Marionettes,* it announced. *Larg and Fellow Martians in "Rip Van Winkle."*

* * * * *

"Oh me, oh my," cried his wife, "we will starve to death. You are a lazy good-for-nothing, you Rip Van Winkle!"

I sat lost in a heaving lava bed of children.

Their eyes were like abacus beads sliding. They couldn't sit still. They plucked at clothes and nose. They

*In a recently published study of Man and the distant future, Sir Charles Galton Darwin, grandson of the old Species Originator, insists that it will take the human being at least a million years to develop an improved model. In the meanwhile, suggests Sir Charles, all that matters for mankind is an efficient urge for survival. Which is all very well if you aren't too fussy about what sort of folk survive.*



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sucked and gobbled on candy bars. They whispered, they giggled, they threw paper rocket ships at each other.

Incidentally, they watched Terwilliger's Living Marionettes.

"You go and you find some work!" howled Mrs. Rip Van Winkle.

It drew an appreciative chuckle from oldsters at conditions before Position Bureau assured one hundred percent employment. Mrs. R. Van W. tearing at his mop-hued wig—Martians are bald as we know.

"You get out of this house and get a job!"

"Yah, yah!" replied Rip in a breathless squeak. "Yah, yah, I go."

He sticks a floppy hat on his large skull. His head swells outsize to his body. It makes him look like a caricature.

He is bent over and skinny. He is all angular joints and spaghetti extremities. He is dressed in old patched clothes hanging like robes on a skeleton. He is two feet tall.

"Yah, yah," he says, repeating the line because kiddies guffaw when he says it. Guffaws drift to plucking, eating, shifting, picking, throwing, whispering, shouting.

Rip gets his gun. It falls apart. There are gales of appreciation. The auditorium is dark except for the stage.

The scene is an old Dutch kitchen, says the program. Preindustrial period. Around 1750, to judge from the set. That's a long time ago. A pretty good story to last six centuries. But does it last so we may enjoy—or perhaps so we may scoff?

She is chasing him out of the kitchen with a broom, an obsolete cleaning utensil. Straw, bound together for purpose of collecting dirt and trash in a contiguous pile. Kiddies don't know that. They think it's something for hitting.

"You get out of here, you lazy good-for-nothing!" she howls.

She hits him over the head. Once. Twice. *Bang, bang!* Kiddies roar, tug at their clothes, their neighbors' clothes, clap their pudgy pink hands, show their white teeth in savage pleasure.

Savage? Dear reader, do you raise eyebrows at that word applied to your children? Do you put down your paper, purse indignant lips? Do you ask yourself in silent outrage—who is this jackanapes, this critic, this vile assaulter on the highblown walls of parenthood?

You do? But read on.

Out goes Rip! Flying through the double door. *Flop!* Into the dust of the road. Mrs. R. Van W. boots the dog, Wolf, after its master. The dog is only a doll made up as a dog. The Martians are too small. A real dog would fill the stage. A real dog might eat the actors.

"And don't come back without a job!" she cries out, fierce and indignant.

She plops in a chair. Her wig slips over her face. Pandemonium. The curtain dances out and meets itself. It shudders to a draping halt.

In the return to self I think of how almost shocking it was to see that wig come sliding off.

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Like dignity fluttering down to fall beneath trampling feet.

Intermission.

The play forgotten, the kiddies crowded into the aisles. Time to stuff in more candy and soda and ice cream and cake and fighting. More rocket-ships arched in graceful swoops through the theatre air.

I remained in my seat, listening to the raging storm of children together. Watching the maelstrom of activity that is the mark of youth. I picked the ticket stub from my coat pocket.

*Terwilliger's Living Marionettes.*

A minor note of prescience tugged at my mind. The words were contradictory I realized suddenly—apparently for the first time.

Marionettes are not living.

And I sat thinking—of the little man and his ragged clothes, of the shrill-voiced woman, hitting and shrieking.

And then I realized that the children were howling at living things. And something tightened in me.

And stayed tight.

Second act.

The mass of children were somehow shoe-horned back in place. The auditorium was like an overstuffed trunk, its edges bulging. Bits of children popped up from the pressure of excitement.

The curtain opened. A flitting moment of hush. Then another scene.

Rip and his flat-faced dog trudged into a country glade. Dandruff-crowned mountains from the background, undulating slightly as breezes move the backdrop. *The power to move mountains,* the phrase occurs to me.

"Oh me, oh my, I'm so tired," says Rip.

He flops down and his feet go in the air. No one notices the look of pain that flares up in his narrow face—no one except me. I look at him carefully as he goes on mouthing childish words. This is Larg, the star. And are those lines in his face from makeup or from misery?

He leans against a fake tree trunk and looks around.

*Brroom! Brroom!*

"Oh my, what is that?" he asks his dog.

His dog says *"Woof!"* Without its face changing an iota. *"Woof!"* again. Its voice drops down from the sky. It is noticeable because it is the only real marionette in this marionette show.

*Brroom!*

Up jumps Rip. He says, "I will look and see what it is!"

He starts off, pretending to walk while the backdrop creaks along on rollers and the tree is tugged offstage by dreadfully visible wires.

I watched him.

I forgot the show. The Martian was limping. There were lines of anguish in his face, obviously not etched with makeup pencils.

He was in pain. But no one noticed it. Not the parents, not the children. Who looks for pain in a piece of wood?

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But perhaps I bestow a sensitivity on myself which was not present at that moment.

For it is later now you see and as I sit here writing of it, I have it *all*: Not just disconcerting fragments born in the midst of seething children.

Why tell more of the show? It's not important. The little men, perhaps six inches tall, bowling marbles while someone in back shook a sheet of tin and made theatrical thunder. That's not important.

The giving to Rip of drink from a minute barrel. Rip choking and coughing, lying down to sleep. And the curtain closing and the lights staying out. And the children rustling like swishing grasses in the blackness.

All unimportant.

And the rest of it too. The curtain opening on Rip, still there, long white whiskers on his face. Rip getting up.

Perhaps it *is* important that Larg looked more natural as a tired old man than he had before. But the rest is of no moment.

And as I sat there, paying scant attention, I decided to go backstage and talk to Larg if I could. It would be better, I thought, than just handing in an ordinary review. Barton liked ingenuity.

But that was a pretext. There was more—more than just a Rip Van Winkle and a twenty-year sleep and an afternoon's entertainment for a mob of pink-chopped children.

And so it ended. Rip back in town, his wife dead, the old political regime unseated, Rip almost shot as a spy. And the happy ending, as per requirement, with Rip sitting under a tree, children about him. Happy days are here again. Curtain.

One call for the actors. They stood stiffly, nodding their heads. Their eyes glittered from the footlights. And it was a sick glitter, the glitter in their eyes.

I went backstage. The little Martians were rushing around, carrying costumes, equipment, scenery. They didn't look at me. They ran past my legs. Their heads just reached my kneecaps. It was like a dream. You don't see Martians en masse very often. It was like being Gulliver all of a sudden.

I saw a man sitting on a stool, leaning against the wall as he read a paper. Every once in awhile he'd lift his eyes to see if the Martians were doing their jobs right. He'd order them about harshly.

"Go on! Hurry up! Grab that flat, you two. Not that way, you dope! *Right* side up, *right* side up!"

And they all kept running around like tiny deaf-mutes, laboring at a hopeless task.

I looked around. But I couldn't see Larg. I went over to the man. He looked up. "No one's allowed back here."

"I'm from the *Globe*," I told him, showing my card. His face changed. He looked interested.

"Yeah?" he said, "How'd you like the show? Good, haah?"

I nodded. What else could I do?

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"You give us a good writeup?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said, "If you'll let me look around back here. Maybe talk to a few of your—actors."

"What actors? Oh—them. What do you wanna talk to them for?" he asked.

"Don't they talk?" I asked.

He squinted. "Yeah," he admitted. As though he were telling me that, sure, the parrot could talk but you can't very well converse with it.

"Look," he said, "You wanna see Mr. Terwilliger? He can tell you anything you wanna know."

"I want to see Larg," I told him.

He looked at me curiously. "What for?"

"Just to talk to him."

He looked at me blankly. Then he shrugged his thick shoulders.

"Go ahead buddy," he said, "If you wanna waste your time. Say you'll give us a good writeup?"

"Read the *Globe* tomorrow," I answered.

"Yeah, I'll do that," he said, "I'll just do that."

He pointed to his left. "The Marshie is back there in the dressing room."

"Doesn't he work?" I asked. All the other "Marshies" were working.

The man looked disgusted. "He's *s'posed* to work," he said, "But he's a goof-off. Thinks he's the star."

His voice went up to a squeak as he mimicked Larg. "'I'm sick, I'm sick!'"

"I understand." I nodded.

I went back and stood by the door. Inside I could hear a faint flutter of coughing—like the coughing of a frail old woman.

I knocked.

The coughing increased. Then I heard him ask who it was.

"May I come in and speak to you?" I asked, "I'm from the *Globe*."

There was a long moment of silence. I stood there restlessly. Finally I heard him cough once more. Then he said, "I can't keep you out."

The room was very dimly lit. Larg was sitting on a shabby couch, his small oddly-proportioned body dwarfed against the pillow he leaned on. He had his tubelike legs propped up before him.

He looked up as I came in. He didn't say anything—just looked. And then he lowered his eyes again. A cough rocked his small body.

I sat down on a chair across from him. I didn't speak. I kept watching him. He looked up finally. His eyes were yellow—and bitter. "Well?" he said.

His voice was pitched lower than it had been while he was portraying Rip Van Winkle.

I told him my name. I asked him how he was.

He looked at me clinically. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. His gaze was expressionless. A slight cough shook him. Then his pointed shoulders twitched back.

"Why should you care?" he asked.

I started to answer. But he interrupted.

"It's an interview you want, isn't it?" he said. "An interview with

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the funny little marionette. With the ugly little yellow-eyed Martian."

"I didn't come to—"

"To be insulted?"

His voice was shrill again. He pushed himself back against the pillow and his small stubby nostrils flared out. Then he closed his eyes. Suddenly. His hands dropped in his lap.

"No, of course not," he said. "You want some pleasant little anecdote. Boy on Mars yearning for the theatre life. The big chance—cheers—flowers—romance of the footlights. God bless Earth."

He opened his eyes and looked at me. "That's what you want isn't it?" he asked.

I was quiet for a moment. Then I said, "I didn't come for an interview. I'm only supposed to write up the performance."

"Then why are you here?" he asked. "Curiosity? Burning desire to goggle?"

"No," I said.

Then we sat in painful silence. I had no idea of what to say. I felt terribly ill-at-ease.

Not because I was alone with a strange extra-terrestrial being. That wasn't it. I've seen enough pictures, enough shows, enough movies. The shock of appearances wears down quickly.

I'll tell you why I was shocked.

Because I was realizing more and more that this small "creature," as you would call him, *wasn't* a mere creature.

He was not, as I had been brought up to believe, some sub-species of animal life with only gifts for mimicking other languages. Not at all. He was an intelligent person.

And he hated me. That's why I felt ill at ease. Because to be hated by an animal is nothing. But to be hated by a rational being is a lot.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I'd—like to talk to you," I hesitated.

He started to speak. But then a violent fit of coughing tore at his voice. His fragile hands shot out to grab a towel from the couch beside him.

He plunged his face into it. And I sat there watching his toothpick shoulders tremble. And hearing his pathetic gagging muffled in the towel, and the horrible coughing.

The coughing eased. He gasped for breath. There were tears shining in his eyes. "Go away please," he said, his voice broken and humiliated. He avoided my gaze.

"You need a doctor," I said.

His chest shuddered again. It was laughter this time. Laughter that had no amusement in it.

"You're very amusing," he wheezed, "Now will you leave me alone?"

I spoke impatiently—as we do when we do not understand. "Listen, I'm not trying to be funny. You're ill and you need a doctor."

The coughing stopped. He looked at me. "You don't understand," he said, "I'm a Martian."

"I don't see . . ."

"You're supposed to laugh at me!"

And I felt myself tighten with

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rage. No—not at him. The rage was for those far-flung generations that had taught me and my brothers to consider Martians as inferior stock.

Because here—in a split second—the entire lie had been flung into my teeth. And there is no more stunning and enraging shock than to have centuries of lies explode in your face.

He leaned weakly against the pillow, the towel held in his lap. I noticed that it was spotted with dark splotches. His blood. When he saw that I noticed he quickly folded the towel so that only clean surfaces showed.

"Larg," I said, "If you feel up to it will you tell me about yourself? And about your people?"

"For publication?" he asked, his tone slightly less cynical. "For an amusing froth in the Sunday supplement?"

I shook my head. "No, just for me."

He looked at me carefully. I couldn't tell whether he believed me or not. But I *could* still feel his shrinking, his distaste for me.

He said, "I suppose you saw my people working back stage."

I nodded. "Yes, I did."

He rubbed a hand over his pale lips. "They're like me," he said, "All sick. All exiles. Exiles of economy."

"I don't . . ."

He coughed once. "We're all here, you see, because we need the money."

"Can't you work on your own planet?"

He glanced at me as though he thought I joked. Then he shook his head. "No, there's nothing there," he said. "Nothing."

We sat in silence a moment. Once again he began to cough into the towel, his face coloring apoplectically. When the spasm had passed his breath came in tortured gasps.

"You'd better not speak any more," I said.

"Why not?" he said. "It doesn't make any difference."

"Are you married, Larg?" I asked.

He smiled bitterly at something I could not see. "I think so," he said, "I'm not sure—any more."

"When did you see your wife last?"

He looked down at his hands. Blankly. "Fifteen years ago," he said.

*"Fifteen!"*

"Yes."

"But—but why?"

"It's very simple," he said, the undercurrent of hate and resentment hard in his voice, "I was teacher of history at the Rakasa School, as you Earth people called it." He paused. "Before you tore it down," he said.

He leaned back his head and stared at the ceiling. "I needed work to support my wife and our children. I joined this company. Other men became miners in their own mines. Laborers, servants, slaves . . ."

He looked down at me. And it was as though his people looked with murderous hate upon ours. A hate time could never wipe out.

"The rest died," he said, "Seven millions of them."

I sat there, numb with the shock

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of his words. I just couldn't understand them, believe them.

For I, like you, had heard of these things, read distorted glossed-over reports on the decimation of the Martian race. Studied from history books that told of disease and drought and famine. Of internecine warfare, of savage death-attacks on Earth military posts on Mars. Of racial suicide due to psychotic pride.

The blame has always been displaced. Twisted, contorted, dropped on the Martians, on Nature, on everything—except us. It is never placed on us.

Those were the thoughts I had. And through all my thinking I could hear the fragile flutter of Larg's breath. Like the last feeble protest of a murdered race.

And then, like a loyal Earthman, I would not even then accept the blame. "I never knew," I said. "I don't expect you'll believe me. But I never knew."

He sighed. "What does it matter?" he said.

Silence again. Nervously I took out my cigarettes. I offered him one. Hhe shook his head. I noticed the bluish veins in his forehead. I lit the cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke to the side.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

I didn't understand. "Do what?" I asked.

"Blow the smoke away from me?"

I still didn't know. I shrugged. "I don't go around blowing smoke in people's faces," I said.

He stared at me for a long moment. Then something seemed to resolve itself in his expression. He relaxed back against the pillow. "So," he said, "I'm people."

He made a sound of tired amusement. "Why, I'd forgotten it," he said ironically.

And what could I say? Let me admit it—as we all should admit it. I was penitent and mute before this fellow-creature. Yes, *fellow*-creature, though we have not earned even the *right* to claim him as brother.

Does that shock you, reader? Does that offend your sensibilities? I can well imagine that it does.

For how should a man feel if he is told that what he has always regarded as inferior to him is equal? And, perhaps, *superior*. How should a man greet the news that his standards are wrong?

No, I expect little sympathy for this account. No man loves another who has shown his frailty to the light.

But I write anyway. For I too was one of you just this early evening. I too believed myself a liberal mind, thought that I had won my personal triumph over bigotry. I too felt perfectly justified in standing on the soapbox of the universe and crying—"I am of the clean, the pure in heart!"

Well, I was wrong. You see that. Or maybe you don't.

"What's your name, young man?" Larg asked.

Once again I felt shock. And yet it was obvious that he was no child, no mere cynical youth. He was much older than I and much wiser.

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"My name?" I faltered. "Walter. Walter Thompson."

And I knew he would never forget it then. He nodded—and looked at me without rancor for the first time. "You know my name," he said quietly.

And the way he said it, it was a gentle unspoken invitation to friendship.

"Why did you come back here?" he asked.

I started to speak. But then I had to stop. Because I had no answer. "I don't know," I finally admitted, shaking my head, "I'm afraid I just don't know."

And for the first time, Larg smiled at me. "Well that's a novelty," he said, his gentle voice bubbling with an undercurrent of kind amusement. "You're the first Earthman I ever met who admitted not knowing everything."

I tried to smile back. But, somehow, I couldn't. "I could give you any number of reasons why I didn't come back here," I said, "But for a reason I *did* . . . I'm stumped."

He sat up a little. His eyes became bright and interested. He cleared his throat delicately and put his hands on his kneecaps.

"I have found that to be commonplace among you Earth people," he said, "The ready knowledge of why you *don't* do things. But no attendant ability to explain why you *do* execute them."

He smiled again. And we both smiled, one at the other. As men smile when they are friends.

"If you would really like to interview me," he said, "I wouldn't mind. Not now."

Hurriedly I put out my cigarette in an ashtray. The outlines of a plan were rising in my mind.

"Listen, Larg," I said.

He listened.

"I'm no intellect," I said. "I haven't the ability to split hairs—or to delve into sociological aspects or philosophy or anything like that.

"But I *can* report. And this situation cries for reporting. I want to tell the readers about you. Not about Rip Van Winkle. Not about the funny little guy from Mars."

I felt my throat contract. "I don't think about you that way anymore," I said, "I think you're as good as the rest of . . ."

Then I twisted my shoulders, impatient with my own words.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't mean to sound smug or selfrighteous. Believe me, I'm ashamed—terribly ashamed. For myself and for my people. But I—I just don't know how to put it.

"You see, I've been brought up to believe the things I believed about you. That others still believe. And now that those beliefs have been pretty well kicked out from under me—well, I'm a little fuzzy at the edges."

Our eyes met. And I thought suddenly how differences in appearance disappear when you look at minds instead of faces.

Larg seemed a brother then. Not an Earth-brother or a Mars-brother. I mean a brother—a person possessing that non-racial, universal trait

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which is separate from feature or environment. That sense of being which may exist in the savage and not in the priest.

Or in the Martian and not in the Earthman. A dignity, a self respect, a soul.

Larg looked at me, smiling. "You've said it very well," he said.

I put out my hand. Then I jerked it back. I wasn't sure. I started to speak to cover the move. And Larg said, "Yes, I'd *like* to shake your hand."

He extended his small fingers. I grasped them as gently as I could. Something beyond anything I had ever felt surged up in me. I can't explain it. But if it ever happens to you you'll know it.

We clasped hands for a long moment.

"I wish I could give you something more than words," I told him, "Something substantial. A doctor, a letter from your wife and children, a promise to get you home—anything. But I—I can't."

He smiled. "You've given me much," he said, "Something more valuable than you may realize. For you have an excess of it each day, I'm sure."

He looked at me carefully. "You've given me friendship," he said, "Understanding, respect."

Then he closed his eyes. His lips tightened. "Those are things that *we* must have as well as you," he said quietly, "Those are things without which no being is complete."

* * * * *

When Walt came in the next morning the city editor called him in. He tossed the review across his desk.

"Finish this off," he said, "I started the deletions."

Walt asked, "What deletions?"

"Cut out all that stuff about the murder of a race, Larg and his noble character. Handle it straight. The show, the kids' reactions. That's all we want."

Walt looked at Barton in disbelief. "You're not going to run it?" he asked.

Barton's eyelids flickered. "You know our policy, Thompson. You knew damn well we couldn't run it."

"No, *I didn't.*" Walt clenched his fists, "I thought this was a newspaper. Not somebody's propaganda sheet—not some rich man's solace."

Barton looked up at him like a harried father. "Where have you been, Walter?" he said patiently. "Welcome back to society."

Walt tossed the review back on Barton's desk. "I goes like that or not at all," he snapped.

"Then not at all," Barton said. "Look, Walt, what are you jumping on me for? *I* don't make policy."

"You help it along!"

"Sit down, Walt," Barton said, gesturing.

Walt slumped down in the chair facing Barton's desk. The editor leaned back.

"I've been wondering how long it would take you to come up with something like this," he said, "It's been overdue. Usually you kids get it out of your system right after college. They don't let it linger

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inside them until they're married and have a kid like you."

Barton fingered the review.

"We *can't* run it, kid," he said, "You know that as well as I do. No matter how true it is."

"Then truth isn't the criterion any more," Walt said acidly.

"Was it ever?" Barton said, "We killed it. The same way I'll have to kill your review unless you doctor it. Let's be practical about this."

"Practical!"

They stared at each other.

"Is it an order?" Walt asked, "Am I ordered to cut its heart out?"

Barton shrugged. "Call it an order then," he said, "Pin it on me if it will make you feel any better."

Walt's face tightened. "Sure," he said, "that will make me feel just fine."

Barton sighed. "Well, here it is, Walt. It's out of my hands, it's policy."

"Policy!" Walt jumped to his feet. "God damn the word!"

They were silent. Barton held out the review. Walt didn't budge.

"I know how you feel, Walter," Barton said, "But you're in a trap, don't you see? *I'm* in a trap. We all are. And we can't afford to tear ourselves loose."

Walt took the review.

"I know what you're going through," said Barton.

"No, you don't," Walt said very quietly, "Not anymore." He turned at the door. "And some day," he said, "I'll be just like you."

He rewrote the story. He cut, chiseled, reworded. It emerged from his efforts clean and pleasant and without subversion. He sent it downstairs and it was printed.

That night he read it as he rode home on the pneumatic tube. He thought about Larg reading it. First anxiously, then with rising disappointment. Then at last with despairing bitterness.

They would never see each other again.

He crumpled the paper and threw it down a disposal chute as he got off the tube car. "He thinks *he* has troubles," he muttered angrily, about Larg, as he walked home.

He thought of the red tape involved in leaving one job and getting another. It took the Position Bureau at least six months. And in the meantime there were bills to be paid. He thought of them. Food bills, clothing bills, payments on the ground-car and the house and the furniture and everything.

He almost hated Larg for injecting dissatisfaction into his life.

Then, after supper, he sat in his clean bright livingroom and thought of it again. Full circle, he thought. That was what it amounted to.

Larg couldn't do anything about it. *He* couldn't do anything about it. Both of them, knowing the situation for what it was, were powerless to change it. They were hemmed in. Bound within an enchanted circle of economics, of policy.

"What's the matter?" asked his wife that night.

"I'm sick, that's what's the matter," he said. "I'm very damned sick."

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# this is klon calling

*by . . . . Walt Sheldon*

**One sure way to live dangerously is to become a practical joker. Should you have any doubts about it you might ask Professor Dane.**

YOU didn't have to be a potential Einstein to take Professor Dane's course. For one thing you got a few easy credits and for another you were entertained—without letup—by Professor Lyman Dane's celebrated wit.

Take the time he was illustrating terminal velocity. He jumped out of the open third story window, horrifying the class, until they learned he'd rigged a canvas life net on the floor below. Or the time he let a mouse loose among the female students to illustrate chain reaction. Or the afternoon he played boogie-woogie on the Huyler Memorial Carillon.

"The absorption of knowledge," he used to say, "increases in direct proportion to the sense of humor—the belly laugh, measured in decibels, being constant."

He could say a thing like that and make it sound funnier than anybody else could. It was partly the way he looked—tall and mournful and sly, with wispy hair that had once been blond, drooping like a tired willow over his forehead.

But for all his vaudeville tactics he was by no means a second rate scientist. Which was why he had

*When last heard from Captain Sheldon was preparing to return to Japan—on the not unreasonable claim that the Island Empire was the only place where he was able to write undisturbed. Considering this two-time Air Force officer's output, however—ranging from upper-bracket love and auto-racing tales to a brilliant new novel, TROUBLING OF A STAR, that has won major bookclub distribution, and including scores of fine science fiction stories—we wonder whether this peripatetic author may not be planning to flood all markets. Not a bad idea.*



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gained his position at Southwestern Tech in the first place. He refused to work directly for the government (no sense of humor, just initials, he said) but this way he could at least be called upon for consultation at the nearby Air Force Development Center, just at the foot of the mountains to the west.

Now the AFDC, as it was called, didn't advertise what sort of thing it was developing—but everybody knew that Lyman Dane was an expert on reactive propulsion or rocket motors. He could tell you—and frequently would without being asked—exactly what mass ratio, nozzle diameter and propulsive velocity would be needed for the first trip to the Moon. He knew how many hours a round trip would take, both for landing there or merely circling the body of the satellite.

He had the courses to Mars and Venus thoroughly charted—but considered a trip to Jupiter somewhat impractical. So, what with Dane's presence and the mysterious white streaks that so often shot up into the sky like fuzzy yarn from the AFDC base, it wasn't hard to guess what was going on.

Nevertheless Professor Dane was surprised and somewhat offended when the young man from the Federal Bureau of Investigation came to call on him one afternoon. And the worst part of it was that the young man didn't have much sense of humor.

"As you know, sir," the young man said, "we've been sighting and tracking these unidentified objects in the sky. You must have read about those they chased near Atlanta yesterday."

"Ah," said Professor Dane. "Martian through Georgia, no doubt."

The young man stared at him blankly. He seemed to Professor Dane one of the most nondescript young men his eyes had ever beheld. He had a clean-shaven pleasant face without exactly being handsome and his eyes were sincere and mild. He wore a neat gray tropical worsted suit and an unobtrusive tie. He was about thirty. Professor Dane supposed that all this was an advantage in his profession.

The young man went on—earnestly. "Without forming any theories about these things we've been asked to take certain precautions. I don't know whether they suspect a hostile power, or what. That's not my job. At any rate I've been given the responsibility of instituting certain security techniques. You do after all, sir, have access to and knowledge of considerable classified information."

This lad reminded him somewhat of his old friend and colleague, Dr. Fincher, out in California. Wally Fincher was a well-known physicist now, though how anyone ever managed to struggle through his dry ponderous books Dane didn't know. Probably he had gained most of his fame through his part in those experiments where they bounced radar blips off the moon, Dane thought.

Wally always talked in long unnecessary words. He never merely "went" when he could "proceed," he never simply "used" when it was

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possible to "utilize," he didn't "get things done"—he "implemented" them. Professor Dane made a mental note to put in a long distance call to Wally that evening and tweak his nose a bit. Maybe Dane could pretend he was the FBI—disguise his voice and interrogate Wally, as though he were investigating him. He chuckled a little at the idea. Then he realized that the young man had been talking and he hadn't been listening.

". . . so among other things, sir, we thought it best to monitor your official mail and hope you won't mind."

"What?" said Dane, raising his eyebrows.

"*And* your phone. You'll hear a couple of clicks whenever you use it. We're recording what's said over it—though I assure you all records obtained will be kept in strictest confidence."

Dane acquiesced. The young man finally managed to make it clear that all this surveillance would have to be with Dane's permission and the professor, annoyed though he was, didn't want to appear uncooperative. He couldn't resist, however, giving the young man the wrong hat when he went out and being delighted when the young man came back for the right one five minutes later. He was glad to see that something could fluster him.

But that wasn't really enough. Professor Dane had been annoyed, and he needed to express himself further—by means of the joke, which was his art—in order to regain some measure of his equilibrium and self-respect.

Inspiration visited him as he was climbing the stairs to his bedroom at ten-thirty that evening. He stopped short, thought a minute, then began to chuckle. He turned and went downstairs again, stepped to the phone. Professor Dane lived alone and no one else would be able to share his planned joke—but this didn't matter.

He had been privately enjoying his pranks ever since, as a frail boy with an unreasonable and dominating male parent, he had discovered that they were one way in which he could compete with hardier souls, at times even surpass them. Never mind the audience, he thought. The jest was the thing!

It was an hour earlier in Los Angeles and Dr. Wallace Fincher was at home. Dane disguised his voice—he did a lot of University Theater work and this kind of thing came to him easily. He listened first to Dr. Fincher's arid humorless, "Hello. Dr. Fincher speaking." Then he heard the preliminary clicking, just as the FBI man had predicted.

"Thandor," said Professor Dane, "this is Klon calling."

"I beg your pardon?" said Doctor Fincher.

"The jig's up," said Professor Dane. "Captain Ix1 in propul-cruiser nine-nine-seven-three will never be able to break through. The Earthlings have set up a close watch—they're suspicious."

"Who *is* this?" Doctor Fincher

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sounded startled. "Who the devil is this calling?"

Dane could barely keep his laughter from breaking into his voice. "Thandor, we can come to no conclusion but that the Terrestrials are definitely hostile. We should have expected that from their primitive stage of development. They have orders to shoot any of our propul-cruisers they can catch. I suggest that we withdraw all ships of the Franistan class immediately from their free orbits and send them on a standard Keplerian course to the home planet for further consultation."

*"Is this some kind of joke?"* Fincher sounded as if he were almost panicky.

"Furthermore," said Dane, "I recommend that we withdraw all agents from Earth. We can't conceal our superior mental development and advanced technology much longer.

"Someone's bound to catch on pretty soon. I was against this plan in the Galactic Council in the first place, you'll remember. Well, farewell, Thandor! I'll be seeing you soon in space!"

And Professor Dane hung up before he exploded with laughter.

He laughed until the tears came to his eyes. He held his stomach with both hands. He was weak. He supported himself on the stair railing and for minutes was unable to take the first tread. With his lively scientist's imagination he could picture the completely bewildered look on the young FBI man's face when he listened to this conversation on the tape recorder or whatever it was they used.

He was certainly going to have to try to get that recording from them. Play it back for Fincher some time —Lordy, Fincher would have apoplexy every time he heard it!

He finally gained enough strength to climb the stairs. He went into his bedroom, still chuckling weakly, still wiping the tears from his eyes, stomach muscles still aching.

Dr. Wallace Fincher stood there by his bed. It *was* Fincher—the same stocky round-faced man with the steel rimmed glasses he had always known. It was either Fincher or the darndest hallucination he had ever . . .

"I'm sorry, Lyman," said Dr. Fincher in a kindly but impersonal voice. "You were getting a trifle too close. I'm afraid you have left me no choice."

He pointed a little silvery tube at Professor Dane and there was a soft buzzing and the smell of ozone and Professor Dane was no longer in the room—or anywhere else.

Dr. Fincher sighed adjusted his glasses and faded into the dimension that would take him back to Los Angeles and his interrupted work.

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# what price venus?

*by . . . . Evan Hunter*

**Tod and Trooper were picked for the Venus assignment because of their all-out hatred for people.**

TOD BELLEW balanced on the tip of the diving board. His was a tall figure against the blue of the sky. His body was muscular, compact and lithe. His hair was blond and close cropped, his eyes narrow and pale blue.

He leaped suddenly into space, down into the shimmering pool below. His world became a cloudy blue, swirling before his eyes. He thought, *It's good to be away from people.*

Silence, dead silence, except for the pounding of blood in his veins. A blue silence that shifted and shimmered. No people. No fools.

His blond head popped up above the surface. The sunlight blinded him momentarily. He shook his head and swam toward the side of the pool with bold easy strokes.

He clambered out, shook himself, walked to a drying chamber. Methodically he adjusted the dials and waited patiently while the warm gusts of air covered his body. In two minutes, fully dried, he stepped out into the sunlight again.

A short man in a tight tunic, much too tight for the stomach that preceded him, smiled at Tod. "Mr. Bellew?" he asked.

*A lot of people seem to think science fiction is something new under the literary sun. Actually sf is old enough to have its own tired clichés. Here is a story that combines such well-worn devices as feuding heroes on a space-mission, a would-be dictator, a man-eating plant and alien folkways. Yet the result in this instance is a tale as fresh and unexpected as the day after tomorrow. Which suggests that in sf, as in other branches of fiction, it is author and treatment that really matter.*



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"Yes," Tod replied, thinking, *What can this fool want? Why can't they all leave me alone?*

"A message for you, sir." The man handed him an official-looking blue envelope. Tod glanced at it briefly. The man waited.

"Well?" Tod asked.

The man grinned sheepishly and said, "Nothing, sir. I . . ."

"Nothing is exactly right," Tod said drily. "I don't carry credits in my swimming trunks."

The balding man looked embarrassed. He bowed obsequiously and turned away.

Tod dropped into a foam chair by the side of the pool. The palm trees whispered softly in the mild breeze. A few clouds, gauzy and white, tiptoed aimlessly across the Neopolitan blue of the sky.

It was all very pleasant—easily one of the nicest areas on Earth, Tod thought. He wondered idly if it could be bought. It would be nice to get rid of the tourists. The Earth, Tod thought, would be a wonderful place if it weren't for people. Perhaps a few—carefully chosen and skillfully disposed of as soon as they began to show signs of wearing around the edges. They would have to be perfect specimens of . . .

The letter.

Tod glanced idly at the blue envelope. Behind the cellophane window were his name and the address of the hotel. In the upper left hand corner, in bold black letters, were the words OFFICE OF THE MILITARY. Below that was the seal of Earth Seven.

Earth Seven—the entire area extending through what had been Canada, the United States, Mexico, South America, the Atlantic Ocean and England.

Tod tore open the flap of the envelope and unfolded the letter that had been inside.

*Mr. Tod Bellew*
*Hotel Crestshore*
*Miami Beach, Florida*

*You are requested to report immediately to the Office of the Military, New York, New York. ETA 2100 Tuesday, March 29, 1989.*

*(signed)*
*Leonard Altz*
*Commander, Earth Seven.*

Tod looked at the brief message again. Estimated time of arrival was 2100 Tuesday, March . . . Why, that was today! His eyes swept rapidly to the large clock in the face of the bath-house wall. He had exactly four hours to dress, pack, eat and get to New York. True, he could probably make it in less than an hour by fast ship, but it was still damned inconsiderate.

Just what did the military want of him? He considered ignoring the message, then thought better of it. *A sad commentary on society,* he thought wryly, *when a citizen can be ordered to be someplace he doesn't want to be.* The worst part of it was that the order had to be obeyed.

Fred Trupa, tall, gangling, his thick brown hair matted on his

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skull, glanced briefly at the scattered garbage cans in front of the building. He hitched up his pants and started up the steps.

A tall girl, redheaded, with a nose too long for the small oval of her face, glanced up from a magazine she was reading. "Hi, Trooper."

"Hi," Trooper said.

The girl wore a tight tunic, molded firmly to the curves of her body, ending abruptly above her knees.

What was her name? Trooper wondered. What difference did it make? All the same, every last one of them. Pigs stuffed together in a filthy hot concrete coffin.

"What's your hurry?" the redhead asked.

"Why don't you read your book?" Trooper said rudely.

"Pretty damned stuck-up, ain't you?" the girl said.

"Look . . ." Trooper began. He considered the futility of arguing with her, added, "The hell with you."

He started into the building, a black uninviting maw. For an instant, he turned to look at the street again. Dull gray tenements reaching concrete fingers toward a gray sky.

Doesn't the sun ever shine here? He wondered. Stinking city. Stinking dirty city pressing against a guy. All day and all night, reaching for him, ready to snatch him up and turn him into a machine like all the rest.

He took a last disgusted look at the street and walked into the gloomy hallway. The redhead stared at him curiously. He stopped before the row of mailboxes, peered into the one marked *Joseph Trupa.* The lock had been broken long ago. He lifted the flap of the box and reached inside for a blue official-looking envelope.

His name was visible in the cellophane window on the front of the envelope. In the upper left hand corner, in bold black letters, were the words OFFICE OF THE MILITARY. Below that was the crest of Earth Seven.

He stuffed the envelope into the back pocket of his breeches and started up the steps in the dim hallway. She'd be waiting, probably drunk again, fat and sloppy. *Mother!*

He passed another tenant in the hallway, quickly looked away. *Everyone with a gimmick,* he thought. *Everyone trying to slit everyone else's throat. A nice big cheerful rat-race in a concrete-and-steel maze. I don't trust any of them. And I'll never trust them.*

He stopped before the door of his apartment and listened. Inside a woman was singing in an offkey voice, loud and raucous. Drunk, as usual, no doubt.

He opened the door and stepped into the ancient living room. Mrs. Trupa came from the kitchen. She was a short squat woman with black hair clinging wetly to the back of her neck. Her sloppy house tunic bore the filth of kitchen drippings. She walked flatfooted, like a big duck in oversized slippers.

"About time you're home," she complained in her usual whine.

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"Lay off," Trooper replied. "Lay off, will you?"

"Ingrate, that's all you are. An ingrate. Ain't done a stitch of work since you served your Compulsory. Think all I got to do is slave all day for—"

"Oh, cut it out, for God's sake."

"Sure, sure. Your father can break his back for you, though, can't he? Out every morning early just to—"

"I said cut it out! A guy comes home and gets a lecture. Always lectures. Why don't you get yourself a soap-box?"

"Don't talk to *me* like that, you little . . ."

Trooper whipped the blue envelope out of his pocket and walked over to the window, where it was lighter. He tore open the flap and read the brief message. His eyes narrowed and then a strange smile spread over his face.

"What is it?" Mrs. Trupa asked.

"I'm leaving," Trooper said. "I have to report to the Military in two hours."

*Maybe they'll call me again,* he thought. *Maybe it's goodbye again, you lousy fat slob!*

## II

They stood before the desk of Commander Altz—Tod Bellew and Fred Trupa. Tod wore an expensive tunic, carefully molded to fit his body. Trooper wore dark ill-fitting breeches and a shirt with a tear in the left sleeve.

They stood and waited for the commander to speak, two men with two things in common—their youth and a deep aversion toward all of mankind.

The commander wore the bright yellow uniform of the Military with the Earth Seven insignia on his collar. His hair was snow-white, clipped short. His eyes were brown. He was tapping a pencil on the desk, looking at the two young men standing before him.

Tod shifted uneasily. Trooper clenched and unclenched his hands in anticipation. Commander Altz cleared his throat.

"You're both wondering why you're here, I imagine," he said.

"Yes," Tod replied with a trace of arrogance.

The commander lifted black eyebrows. "There's a seed on Venus," he said abruptly. "Earth Seven wants it, must have it."

He looked at the two men, appraising their reactions to his blunt statement.

"And?" Tod asked.

"You two are going after it," Altz went on.

Tod and Trooper looked at each other, then back to the commander. "Why us?" Tod asked. "Why not somebody else?"

Altz lifted his eyebrows again. "Oh, various reasons—progress reports during both your Compulsories—physical condition—Height, stature, general bone structure, facial proportions—things like that."

"What's that got to do with it?" Trooper wanted to know. He was anxious to leave New York but the idea of Venus didn't exactly appeal.

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Altz smiled. "A great deal—a great deal."

"I wish you'd get to the point," Tod said, forgetting for a moment that Altz, in this particular situation, commanded more authority than he did himself.

"All right, I'll get to the point. Earth Seven is strong. We've got more weapons and machinery than practically all the other Earth Sectors put together. There's only one thing we lack—people. Men to man the weapons and the machines—fighting men. The entire population of Earth Seven is hardly equal to one third that of the other Sectors combined."

Tod sighed. "And for this we have to go to Venus?"

"Earth Seven is ready for a merger," Altz continued. "I don't have to tell you, of course, that this is top-secret stuff. The balance here is a stagnant one. We're ready to expand —west to Earth Eight and Nine, east to Earth Six, Five, and Four."

"Expand?" Trooper asked.

"A consolidated Earth," Altz explained, "with a central command here in Earth Seven."

Trooper nodded.

"We're ready to go, as soon as we get what we need. I'll describe the seed you're to bring back from Venus."

"I still don't understand why we were chosen for this particular job." Tod frowned. "What's our physical appearance got to do with this job? Why *us?*"

"We've tried to get the seed before. We've failed each time. This time we can't afford to fail. We either get it now or drop our plan entirely. The men we've already sent to Venus never returned."

"Why?" This was Trooper.

"The Venerians are somewhat reluctant about giving up this seed. It's fairly important to their culture."

"And how will we succeed where the others have failed?" Tod asked.

"That's where your physical appearance comes in. You'll go to Venus as Venerians. Tall, blue and big-boned."

"There must be a million men in Earth Seven who are tall and big-boned," Trooper protested.

"Yes, but a certain mental attitude is necessary for the job too. Your records seemed to indicate you were the right men."

"What kind of mental attitude?" Tod asked.

"That's not important. We've made the choice and you're the men we want."

"This is fantastic," Tod said. "Of what possible use can a Venerian seed be? I'm afraid I don't approve of this at—"

"I feel I should tell you both that from here on in it's no longer a matter of choice. You are both under martial law."

"We've already served our Compulsory," Tod reminded the commander.

"I'm well aware of that, Bellew." Altz' voice hardened.

A deep silence shouldered its way into the room. Altz began tapping the pencil on the desk again.

"You'll leave in a week. The necessary adjustments in appearance

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will be made before then. You'll be instructed in language, culture, topography—everything you'll need to know to pass as Venerians."

"And the seed?"

"It's small, no more than a quarter of an inch in diameter. It's a pale blue in color, with a thin network of fibre under the translucent covering. You'll see pictures of it and you'll study models before you leave. Everything will be taken care of."

"How many of these seeds will you want?" Trooper asked.

"Two will be sufficient. You'll be given specific orders before you leave."

"And this seed is so very important?" Tod asked.

"Very important."

"How?"

"I've already told you. It can mean the difference between a stagnant *status quo*—or a vibrant new change."

"How?" Tod asked again.

"You'll report to surgery first," Altz said, completely ignoring Tod's question.

Bellew and Trupa turned to go. Altz rapped on the desk with the end of his pencil.

"You're forgetting something, aren't you?"

Trooper was the first to turn. Tod moved more slowly.

"I told you that you're both under military orders now, didn't I?"

Instantly Trooper brought up his hand in salute. Tod eyed the commander for a hostile instant. Slowly he brought his hand in salute.

"Dismissed," Altz snapped.

The room was long and white and antiseptic. The doctor hovered over Trooper's body, carefully making measurements.

"Wrist to elbow, thirteen," he called.

An assistant in a white gown wrote the figures down.

"Elbow to shoulder, thirteen and one quarter."

Again the pencil moved over the pad.

"Ankle to knee, eighteen and one half."

On and on, measurements, measurements, measurements. Trooper lay stretched out on the long table, waiting for it to end.

"Hair, brown," the doctor said. "Eyes . . ." he looked at Trooper's face, ". . . brown."

"Will I live?" Trooper cracked.

"I think so." The doctor smiled. "We'll have to add a few inches to your elbows but that'll be fairly simple. And your legs are a little short but they can be fixed too, of course."

Trooper frowned as the doctor went on.

"Your eyes, of course, are all wrong. Blue lenses should take care of that nicely. Your hair will have to be dyed blue. And your skin, of course . . ."

"Is all this permanent?" Trooper asked.

"Worried about your good looks, eh?" The doctor chuckled. "No, it's not permanent. We can undo anything we do and the skin coloring will wear off in a year or so of its own accord."

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Trooper sighed loudly and deeply.

"We'll start whenever you're ready," the doctor said.

"I'm ready right now," Trooper answered, somewhat resigned to his fate. If it wasn't one damned rat-race it was another. Always being pushed, always being pushed, always . . .

The anesthetic cup covered his nose and mouth and he drifted off into a peaceful blackness in which tiny rodents scurried back and forth noiselessly.

They sat together in the Hypnobooth, earphones clapped tightly to their ears. Before them the Tridim flashed brilliant scenes of Venus as the words droned on and on and on in their ears.

They saw its position in the galaxy, were told its diameter, its density, its atmospheric conditions, its allotment of heat and light.

Now a picture of a large plant flashed onto the screen. It was a pale pink, with enormous petals that flapped like the ears of a cocker spaniel.

"Among the varied plants found on Venus is the Pink Eucador, startling for its enormous size and sensitivity to sunlight. The Eucador family includes the Striped Eucador, the Violet Eucador, and the Pink Eucador."

In rapid succession, pictures of these plants were flashed onto the three-dimensional screen.

"The Striped Eucador"—here the striped flower, pink, and pale violet, flashed onto the screen—"is smallest of the group. There are five petals on each bloom. The stem is short and the plant grows close to the ground. Its smell may be compared to a mixture between Earth's muskmelon and magnolia."

At this point there was a slight hissing in the Hypnobooth. The odor slithered from holes in the walls and into the nostrils of Trooper and Tod.

There were more plants, so many plants that the mind reeled. Slowly the voice went through each variety, from the simplest to the infinitely complex.

"Most startling in the development of plant life on Venus, however," the voice said, "is the . . ."

Came a scratching sound and a garbled medley of noises. Undoubtedly a defective tape, Trooper thought. The screen flashed through a series of blinding colors, then focused on the tall blue figure of a Venerian native.

". . . closely resembling the human being," the voice began abruptly. "Notice the long limbs, tapering toward the wrists and ankles. The skull covering is much like human hair, deep blue in color, as are the eyes. The skin, if we may call it such, is blue."

The screen presented a closeup of the hands, showing long sensitive-looking blue fingers.

"The hands are probably the most important part of the entire structure. It is with these that nourishment . . ."

Again, the annoying scratching garbled the tape as the screen con-

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tinued to display the picture of the hand. Scraps of meaning penetrated the uproar in disjointed phrases.

". . . after the free-moving stage has been achieved . . . pedal extremities no longer . . . Venerian soil is . . . and blossoming . . ."

The scratching stopped abruptly and the screen went blank. A man in white snapped on the lights. He removed the headphones from Tod's head and snapped his fingers. Tod blinked and stared around him. The attendant repeated the process with Trooper.

"That's all for today, boys," he said cheerfully.

"Better get a new tape," Trooper said. "That one's pretty muddled."

"Nothing really important," the attendant said. "You're getting enough to keep you going up there, never fear."

"I hope so," Tod said. He looked at Trupa who was now almost a carbon copy of himself. They were both tall and blue—their bones lengthened, their skins dyed, their hair blue.

It was remarkable how much they resembled the natives they'd seen on the screen, Tod thought. For an instant, his mind flashed back to Miami and the whole foolish mission washed over him despairingly. Venus! Of all the idiotic places to...

"You coming along?" Trooper asked.

Tod turned appraising eyes on Trooper. *A gutter rat,* he thought. *Straight from the slums. Give him a new skin and a few lengthened bones and he thinks he's my equal.*

"No, thanks," Tod answered. "I've got a few things to do."

Trooper nodded curtly. *Just like all the rest,* he thought. *A rich bastard with his own particular gimmick. This was going to be some picnic. Some damned picnic!*

The language lessons had already begun. At night it droned into their ears via Somnophone. During the day, they spoke it to instructors, catching the inflection, the subtle undertones of the speech.

And in the meantime they were constantly exposed to the Hypnobooth, with its three-dimensional screen and its tape recordings. There were pictures of the seed and it was almost as Altz had described it.

Actually it appeared to be a tiny celluloid pellet, pale blue and translucent. Beneath the outside covering a network of blue lines could be seen criss-crossing wildly. These terminated, it appeared, just below the surface of the seed, probably ready to burst forth as roots, once the seed was nourished.

There were models too. Trooper held one in his fingers, turning it over slowly. "All the way to Venus for this," he said to Tod.

Tod didn't answer.

Trooper turned and held up the seed. "All the way to—" he repeated.

"I heard you," Tod snapped angrily.

Trooper's eyes narrowed behind their blue contact lenses. "I don't like this any better than you do, friend," he said.

"Don't 'friend' me," said Tod.

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"That would suit me just fine," Trooper said.

"It had better, because that's the way it's going to be."

"Let's get one thing straight," Trooper said. "I'm here because the job was assigned to me. I don't like blue skin, blue hair *or* blue eyes. And while I hadn't given much thought to it before, I don't think I like you a hell of a lot either."

"The feelings are mutual, I assure you," Tod said.

"Just so we understand each other. This isn't a fraternity reunion. We're going after that goddamned seed. Once we get it and bring it back, that's that."

"Precisely," Tod said. "And now, if you'll excuse me."

He turned on his heel, a tall blue figure striding regally down the wide corridor.

Trooper stared after him. He had the feeling, as he'd had many times before, that he was standing on a fast-moving treadmill.

## III

The long silver ship streaked through space. The stars blinked around it in mute disapproval. Commander Altz stood before the two men in space-suits. They were tall men with blue skins and the suits had been constructed especially for them. Altz wore his yellow uniform with a maroon cape slung over his shoulder. A smart officer's cap perched on his white hair. He seemed to be in a cheerful mood.

"A few minutes," he said. "Just a few minutes and you'll be on Venus — on your own."

Tod nodded. It had been a grueling business but he felt he knew as much about Venus as there was to know. Now, if everything went well, they'd get the seed, make the necessary radar contact with Earth and be picked up as soon as a rocket could be dispatched. That, of course, was still in the future. Once they left the security of the ship they would indeed be on their own.

"You understand, of course, that you're to contact us as soon as you've found the seed," said Altz.

"We understand," Trooper said.

"Then, you'll stay in the exact spot from which you sent the signal. A ship will pick you up in five days."

"We've gone over this at least a dozen times," Tod snapped. "Do we look like first-grade morons."

"What was that, Bellew?" Altz asked, anger in his voice.

"Do we look like first grade morons, *sir?*" Tod asked, emphasizing the last word in mock respect for Altz' rank.

"That's better," Altz said, apparently satisfied. "I just wanted to make sure everything was understood. We can't afford to bungle this again."

A uniformed cadet poked his head into the cabin. "Three minutes to peak, sir," he said.

"Ah, good," Altz said. He turned to the two blue men. "We're almost at the peak of our orbit. You understand, of course, that we're not landing. Our orbit is plotted to overshoot the planet. When we reach

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the turning point we'll decellerate slightly. You'll leave us then."

"We've gone over this before too," Tod said.

"I'm not sure I like your attitude, Bellew," Altz warned.

"Why, Commander," Tod said in surprise, "you said it was my attitude that was partly responsible for this lovely assignment."

A warning buzzer sounded in the cabin, a red light flashed on the bulkhead. "Get your helmets on," Altz said.

Trooper and Tod slipped plasteel bubbles over their heads. Rapidly they tightened the bolts on each other's helmets, as they had practiced so many times on Earth.

Tod cut in his oxygen, hearing a slight hiss in his helmet as he adjusted the flow. He pressed the button set in the chest of his suit and tested his radio. "Can you hear me?" he asked Trooper.

Trooper's hand went to his chest and a moment later his voice sounded in Tod's helmet: "I can hear you."

A cadet opened the airlock as a green light flashed on the bulkhead. Ponderously the two men stepped into the lock. Altz saluted. He was the last being they saw before the door clanged shut at their backs.

Tod turned the big wheel on the outer hatch, held it for a moment as he waited for the light in the bulkhead to blink.

"There it is," Trooper's voice said.

The blue light over their heads blinked rapidly, on and off, on and off. Tod threw his shoulder against the hatch as the big ship seemed to hang in space for a moment, preparing to reverse its course. He pushed outward into the blackness, fell free for a few seconds to give Trooper time to clear the wash of his jets, then turned them on full.

A yellow-red trail of dust seared backward from the shoulder jets and he streaked through the blackness, feeling terribly alone for the first time in his life, alone in a pinpointed blackness that seemed to stretch away forever.

He glanced backward, saw Trooper clear the ship and turn on his jets. Trooper pulled alongside as the big ship dipped around, shuddered with a new burst of power and vanished into the blackness.

"That's that," Tod said.

"That's that," Trooper said.

Below them, covered with pale shifting clouds, was Venus. They hung in space, two bloated grotesque figures against a glistening backdrop of stars, watching the wash of the big ship smoulder and die.

Like a startled rabbit then Tod whirled, jets flashing, and dived for the shrouded planet.

They dropped silently into the jungle, lay flat on their stomachs for several moments, waiting, waiting. When they were sure they had landed unseen Tod Bellew pressed the speaker button on his chest.

"You think we should take off our helmets?"

"They *said* the atmosphere was breathable," Trooper answered.

Tod peered through the bubble

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and looked at Trooper suspiciously. "Come on," Trooper said, "I'll unhitch you."

"No," Tod said sharply. "I'll help you with *your* helmet first."

Trooper shrugged and stood before Tod as he unscrewed the bolts that held the helmet to the breastplate. Trooper reached for Tod's helmet and Tod backed away.

"We've got to get that seed," he told Trooper. "One of us has to get back with it. No sense in both of us taking off our helmets until we're sure about the atmosphere."

Trooper smiled grimly and said, "What makes you think I'm volunteering? What makes you think I trust Altz any more than you do?"

"This is ridiculous," Tod said, pressing the button on his chest. "We can't just stand here all day, waiting to take off our helmets."

"Then why don't you take *yours* off," Trooper asked.

Tod's eyes suddenly widened in fear. "Look out," he called, "behind you!"

Trooper whirled, reaching for the blaster that hung on the trouser leg of the space-suit. At the same instant, Tod lurched forward, putting the strength of his shoulders and back against Trooper's turning body. Caught off balance, Trooper toppled to the ground.

Tod leaped onto his body, straddling Trooper's chest with his knees. With a deft movement he snapped the helmet from Trooper's head and tossed it into the tall grass. He held Trooper pinned to the ground as he waited, his eyes glued to Trooper's angry face.

After a long while, Trooper smiled and said something. Tod watched his lips, unable to hear inside the plastic bubble. Trooper nodded and formed the letters O and K with his lips.

It was then that Tod let him up and unscrewed the bolts he could reach on his helmet. Trooper unloosened the rest of the bolts and Tod lifted the plastic bubble from his head.

He took a deep breath and turned to Trooper. "Looks as if Altz was telling the truth after all," he said.

Trooper's eyes narrowed. "Lucky, aren't we?"

Tod glanced sharply at Trooper, startled by the tone of his voice. "We'd better get out of these suits," he said softly.

They shrugged out of the suits, standing blue and tall in the Venerian jungle. They wore loin cloths, nothing else. Quickly, they extracted folding shovels from the pockets of the suits and began to spade the soft earth.

Trooper stopped digging once to examine the portable radar unit encased in the breastplate of the suit.

"Come on," Tod said. "Come on."

Trooper joined in the digging again, beginning to sweat freely. "I wonder if this stuff runs," he said, dead-panned.

"Very funny," Tod said drily. He began stuffing his suit into the hole he had dug. "We'd better speak

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Venerian from here on in," he suggested.

Trooper considered this as he began burying his suit. "You go for this cloak-and-dagger stuff, don't you?" he asked.

Tod glanced up. "Sure, I adore it. Nothing I like better than sweating in a stinking jungle with a—"

He cut himself short and finished covering his suit. "Can't you hurry?" he asked.

"I'm doing my best," Trooper replied. "What's the rush anyway? Have you got any idea where we're going to find this damn seed? It might be in any one of these plants."

"The sooner we get started the sooner we get back. That's all I'm interested in."

Trooper dumped his shovel on top of the space-suit and covered the rest with his hands. He tore up some weeds and scattered them over the fresh mound of earth.

"Okay," he said, "let's go."

## IV

They struck out through the jungle, speaking only Venerian now, stopping at each plant to examine the petals, to prod deep within the flower, searching for a translucent blue-veined seed.

"A botanist," Trooper said, frowning. "A goddamn botanist."

They pushed on, the sun searing down through the magnifying layers of clouds that covered the planet. Trooper was hot—he was hotter than he ever remembered being. Somehow, he was sure that if his skin weren't blue he'd be cooler. He began to curse the color of his skin, began to curse the plants that stretched in endless monotony around them, began to curse the planet itself.

A seed—a lousy seed! All the way to Venus for a seed. Like looking for a needle in a haystack. Why hadn't they told them just what plant the seed belonged to? Why all the hush-hush?

He trudged along behind Tod, stopping at a tall flowering plant, tearing open an elongated pod near the top. Six brown seeds tumbled to the ground and Trooper scrambled after them, cutting his hand on the jagged weeds in the undergrowth. He picked up the seeds and stared at them.

"Brown," he muttered. "*Brown!*"

"Any luck?" Tod asked.

"No," Trooper said sullenly. "No luck."

"Let's get moving."

They began to move again, pushing their way through the jungle, scrutinizing each plant, each shrub, each bush, each weed, with inquisitive eyes and probing fingers. Trooper was sweating more freely now, the moisture oozing from every pore in his body.

"Let's go," Tod said.

*Let's go,* Trooper thought. *Let's go. Let's go. Let's go.*

And all at once, quite unreasonably, all the heat, all the plants, all the treacherous undergrowth, the reaching thorns, the pulling weeds, all of these seemed to center themselves in the plodding figure of Tod

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Bellew. A surging hatred boiled up in Trooper's being. For a blind moment he thought of killing the blue figure that trudged along before him, of killing him, of sending the radar signal back, of sitting down to wait for the pickup ship.

It would be nice to sit somewhere in the shade—somewhere out of this heat that . . .

"Wake up, damn you." It was Tod's voice. "There's something up ahead."

"What?" Trooper said wearily.

"I think it's a village. You remember the pictures they showed us."

"Glory be," Trooper said, "a village! Goody goody gum drop."

"The next time you speak Terran . . ." Tod warned.

"Shove it," Trooper said. Then, in Venerian, "Do you see any natives?"

"No. Let me do the talking until we're on safe ground."

"Who nominated you for leader of this little party?" Trooper asked, sarcasm thick in his voice.

"I just nominated myself."

"And who seconded the nomination, may I ask?"

They were close to the village now. A cluster of huts, conical in shape, thatched, laid out in a neat circle, the center of which seemed to be a high mound of soft earth.

Quite suddenly a tall Venerian crossed the clearing in the center of the huts. He saw Tod and Trooper and waved his arm in a gesture of friendly greeting.

"I'll handle this," Tod whispered.

Trooper was about to answer, thought better of it.

The Venerian grinned and approached the two Terrans. It was amazing what a job the surgeons and magic men on Earth had done, Trooper mused. If he hadn't known better he would have sworn he was watching himself cross the clearing.

The Venerian stopped before the two men and raised his arm, folding the other across his chest.

Trooper automatically made the greeting sign they'd practiced on Earth.

"Welcome," the Venerian said. "Our village is honored twice."

"And we," Tod repeated the customary acknowledgement of welcome, "are honored to be welcome—doubly honored because we are two."

"I am called Ragoo," the Venerian said, "son of Tandor."

"Toda do they call me," Tod answered, "son of Palla, and here with my brother Troo."

"Welcome, Toda and Troo."

"We have traveled far," Tod said, "and would know the name of your village that we may honor it when we return home again."

"Crescent Eight," the Venerian replied, "and to which village do we owe the honor of your presence?"

Trooper watched Tod carefully. He knew he was probably making a few fast mental calculations, picturing Crescent Eight on the projected diagram they'd seen back on Earth.

*Crescent Eight—that would be pretty close to Crescent Eleven,*

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*Nine and Ten being far distant to the South. A good safe bet would...*

"Crescent Five," Tod said, just as Trooper completed the same mental calculation.

"Welcome," the Venerian Ragoo said again. Trooper wondered how many times he was going to repeat *welcome* before he invited them in and gave them something to eat or a place to sleep.

They started into the village and natives appeared magically, swarming over the clearing, shouting their welcomes loudly. The men were dressed exactly like Tod and Trooper, naked except for loin-cloths.

They looked amazingly human, except for their peculiar proportions. Long and thin they were, with a subtle hint of strength rippling beneath their bright blue skins.

Trooper stared in interest as he noticed some women come into the clearing for the first time. The women too were naked, except for a waist cloth that reached almost to their knees. Their breasts were bare, full, blooming like the flowers of a rare tropical plant.

And where the peculiar length gave the men an elongated somewhat-stretched appearance, it added a willowy sensuous beauty to the women of the village.

Their skin too seemed to shimmer and glow in the intense glare of the filtered sunlight. Their hair, long and blue, hung like vibrant seaweed about their shoulders. Their eyes tilted slightly, giving them an Oriental slant. But Trooper saw nothing exotic in the eyes themselves. They were open and frank and honest.

About the necks of each of the women, glistening brightly in the sunlight, were strands of jewels—delicate beautifully-rounded spheres that glowed in incandescent beauty.

As the women came closer Trooper noticed that the older ones among them wore no jewelry at all. And the youngest of the group wore tiny spheres, lacking in lustre—dull rounded pebbles. It was the middle group, those who were neither girls nor matrons, those who were women in the full bloom of maturity, that wore the brightest largest spheres.

Trooper stared at these until he felt his close scrutiny was becoming too obvious. He realized they were being led to one of the thatched huts. Ragoo chattered incessantly to Tod as they walked slowly across the clearing.

"You will stay," Ragoo was saying, "for at least a little while. The Planting is not far off, you know."

Trooper watched Tod as the cloud of confusion spread over his face. "The Planting?" Tod asked.

Trooper searched in his mind for some record, some mention of the Planting. He could remember nothing about a planting.

Ragoo smiled and put an arm around each of the men. His arm felt cool to the touch, almost like the arm of a dead man.

"Then you have not sown," Ragoo said, still smiling. "It is an even greater honor that you visit our village at this time."

Trooper smiled wearily as Tod

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went through the *mutual honor* business once more.

"You must be weary," Ragoo said. "You will rest here and feed whenever you are ready."

"Thank you," Tod said.

"Thank you," Trooper said.

Ragoo left them alone in the cool interior of the hut.

"*Well!*" Trooper said in English.

"If I have to tell you again!" Tod warned. "Venerian! Speak Venerian, do you understand?"

"Keep your shirt on," Trooper said. "I'm as anxious to get out of here with my blue skin on as you are."

Tod glanced out at the clearing, then lowered the flap of the opening. The hut grew darker instantly. "What did you think of them?" he asked Trooper.

Trooper shrugged. "No different from anyone else. They're all the same—Earth, Venus." He shrugged again.

"They seem like a simple lot," Tod said.

"Yeah," Trooper said. He wiped a hand across his sweating brow. "You know, I can't figure out how Ragmop, or whatever his name is, stays so cool."

"Did you notice that too?"

For the length of a heart-beat the two men's eyes met. They had noticed something together, had shared an instant of mutual recognition, however small.

And then, like a fist smothering a dim candle, distrust closed tightly about them, bringing with it the old wariness.

"Sure, I noticed it," Trooper snapped. "I wouldn't have mentioned it if I hadn't."

Tod's brow wrinkled in a frown. He turned to the flap and threw it backward. "Simple dolts," he said vehemently.

"I'm getting hungry," Trooper said.

He lifted his loin-cloth. Strapped about his waist was a leather belt inset with a series of pockets. He unsnapped two, removed blue tablets from one, white tablets from the other.

These he threw into his mouth, swallowing quickly. "Some meal," he said.

"They warned us against trying any Venerian food," Tod said. "They're not sure whether it's edible or not."

"I'm not sure whether these pills are edible or not, either."

"They're not supposed to be tasty," Tod said. "They're supposed to supply all of our daily calory requirements."

"I wonder what I should have for dessert," Trooper said. He reached into one of the pockets and extracted a pink pill which he popped into his mouth. "Lemon meringue pie," he said sarcastically.

"I hope we find that seed soon."

Trooper burped. "I should have tried the chocolate pudding," he said morosely.

## V

The next day they started out into the jungle long before the natives were up. It was hot—just

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as hot as it had been the day before.

Tod thought of Miami Beach, thought of the luxurious hotel and the swimming pool. And then his mind reverted to the present situation. He rubbed a hand across his forehead, breathing deeply. There was a rank smell to the jungle, a smell of ancient crowded growth, a smell of plants growing in wild profusion.

He pushed a vine aside, ducked under it, stared around him. There were so many plants, too many plants. Altz had been crazy to send two men on this ridiculous hunt. What he needed was an army of botanists, equipped to stay on Venus for thirty years, searching for a seed as elusive as truth.

The simile pleased him somehow. *As elusive as truth.* As elusive as truth in a world of thieves and liars, he should have added. Again he thought of Earth and he compared it to Venus.

There wasn't very much difference, he realized. Venus was a jungle of plants, Earth a jungle of animals. Here in this primitive sprawling jungle the plants fought for supremacy, putting tendril against tendril, vine against vine, root against root. Arguing for the right to a stretch of soil or a ray of sunshine. The weaker plant succumbed, smothered by the stronger, and was left to rot on the fetid floor of the jungle.

On Earth it was the same. He was lucky. He was one of the stronger plants. He was capable of buying and selling a hundred stinking crawling Earth humans—the animal counterparts of the weaker Venerian plants.

He had no sympathy for the sniveling creatures of Earth, no more sympathy than he had for a strangled bush here in the vicious jungle. But he was a paradox in that he had no sympathy for the stronger plants either, the men who controlled the Earth, the men like Altz who were ready to grab more and more, smothering, strangling like the powerful denizens of this jungle.

With an honesty he had previously fancied himself incapable of, he realized that he too was one of these men, that he too would as soon squelch a trembling beggar as look at him.

*A product of my society,* he mused. *A product of the society I hate.*

He sighed deeply and stopped, turning to face Trooper behind him. "Let's take a break," he said. "I'm tired."

Trooper nodded and dropped to the jungle floor, stretching out languorously. Tod dropped down beside him, mopping his brow again.

After awhile, Trooper sat up and stood staring into the jungle. "There's a new one," he said.

"A new *what?*"

"Plant. Haven't seen that one before."

"Mmm," Tod murmured lazily.

"Might as well take a look," Trooper said. He struggled to his feet. "Might be the one we're after."

Tod closed his eyes as Trooper made his way toward the bright yellow plant ahead. The plant had a

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long thick stem. Branches, stout and green, jutted out from the stem and tendrils dropped from these to trail limply on the ground. An enormous yellow bloom topped the stem, exuding a peculiarly sweet smell.

Trooper stepped up to the plant, close to the stem, and started to part the closed petals of the yellow bloom.

*"Holy . . . !"*

The cry tore through the jungle like the abortive scream of a wounded animal. Tod leaped to his feet, his eyes widening in terror. He stood glued to the spot, incapable of moving. Sweat broke out on his brow, streamed down his neck, cascaded off his chest in little rivulets. He shivered, tried to summon up the muscle-power he no longer possessed.

Not more than seven feet away Trooper clawed at his throat, trying to loosen the tendril that was wrapped tightly about it. The plant had suddenly come to life, limp tendrils snapping like bull-whips, lashing about his body, curling tightly about his arms and legs, pulling him closer to the yellow bloom.

*"Tod!"* Trooper screamed. "For *God's* sake . . . !"

He kicked out at the stem and a tendril dropped from his arm. He coughed, pried at the steely vine that was tightening about his throat. Another tendril lashed out, wrapped itself around his wrist, pulled it away from Trooper's throat.

*"Tod!"*

Silence—a silence as heavy as the clouds that smothered the planet, as intense as the sun that beat down firecely through the treetops. Silence—except for the thrashing of plant and a human.

Tod stood motionless, watching the struggle like a spectator in a box seat. Trooper loosened the tendril from his throat, tried to step back. Another tendril slapped out across his face and he blinked his eyes in pain. The tendril curled about his throat again, slowly, like a boa-constrictor tightening its death grip. Trooper thrashed about wildly as the plant seemed to exert itself in a supreme effort to lift him off his feet.

He kicked again as he was raised from the ground. And at the same instant, the yellow blossom parted, petals opening wide to reveal a fuzzy opening.

Tod sprang forward and wrapped his arms about Trooper's legs. A probing tendril reached out for him and he slapped it aside. He held onto Trooper, fighting the tremendous lifting power of the plant. A tendril loosened from Trooper's waist and curled around Tod's arm. Tod sank his teeth into it and a bitter taste flooded over his tongue. He spit and bit again as the tendril loosened.

Trooper hung limply in the grip of the plant while Tod tore at it, ripping, scratching, biting. He kicked at the stem, dodged the swinging vines, pulled at the petals of the yellow bloom. Trooper dropped to the ground, one tendril wrapped tightly about his ankle.

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Tod descended on this with a fanatic fury, stamping it with his feet, kicking. He fell to the ground and pounded it with his fists, sinking his teeth into it at last. The tendril withdrew slowly, slithering across the jungle floor.

Tod seized Trooper's wrists and pulled him away from the plant—far away.

When at last he stopped, he looked back at a peaceful-looking yellow flower blooming in the distance. He sat down, panting his lungs out. Trooper lay at his feet, his eyes closed.

When Tod had caught his breath he reached over and slapped Trooper across the face. Trooper's eyes blinked. Tod slapped him again. This time the eyes fluttered open. Trooper stared blankly at Tod Bellew for several minutes, then his face cracked into a weak smile. "Thanks," he said.

Every instinct in Tod's body shouted for him to snap at Trooper. Every facet of his training, every ounce of experience, every previous human relationship, urged him to say, "I'd do the same for any dog."

But he didn't say it. He was sweating with the struggle and his hands trembled a little but he didn't say it. Instead he looked off to the side, avoiding Trooper's eyes and murmured, "You had a close call, Trupa."

Trooper nodded, still smiling weakly. "Goddamn seed," he said. This time Tod smiled with him in spite of himself.

When they told Ragoo about the encounter with the plant he nodded sagely and said, "There are good and bad in everything."

They didn't understand what he meant at the time but they learned a little more fully later.

Ever since they'd come to the village they had been living on the calory pills from their belts. They hadn't had a real chance to observe the eating habits of the Venerians and it hadn't really interested them anyway. But after the experience with the plant, they spent more and more time in the village and were puzzled to note that the Venerians seemed to have no regular eating habits. In fact they never saw one of them eating.

"It's impossible," Tod said. "Everyone has to eat."

"Have *you* ever seen them eat?"

"No, but . . ." Tod stopped, shrugging his shoulders. "We'll just have to watch more closely."

They began to watch more closely.

The Venerians were a simple race. They rose early, escaping the rays of the sun in the conical huts for long rest periods. They seemed to do little work during the day. Their time was spent in playing games, singing, dancing. The only work they really did was of a seemingly religious nature. Or so Trooper and Tod thought.

In the center of the village was the large mound of earth. The huts were clustered about it, the mound was easily accessible to all of them. Parties of men would go off into the jungle and return with fresh

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soil daily. This they would pile onto the mound.

Tod and Trooper were confused until they hit on their hosts' religious theory. The theory seemed to be substantiated by the peculiar rites the Venerians performed.

At irregular intervals one or another of them would go to the mound and thrust his hands deep into the soft soil. He would leave them there for several minutes and then withdraw them.

"It's a ritual," Tod said. "It can't be anything else."

But they continued watching.

They were surprised that they saw no Venerians they could classify as children. There were the old, the middle-aged, the mature and the adolescent. But no children.

"I can't understand a society without children," Tod said, still confused.

"Maybe they eat their young," Trooper suggested.

Tod frowned. "I doubt it. I've never seen an easier-going people."

"They *do* kind of grow on you," Trooper admitted. "They're just what you said they were in the beginning—a simple people."

It was about then that a new activity began in the village. The mound in the center was replenished daily but in addition to that a new area of soil was being laid down. The area was a large rectangle, also within the ring of huts. But in contrast to the mount it was flat.

Trooper stopped Ragoo and asked him what it was all about.

Ragoo smiled. "You are joking."

"No—no, really." Trooper said.

Ragoo chuckled out loud this time. "Be patient, my friend. We are preparing for the Planting."

"Oh," Trooper said.

"You will sow," Ragoo promised.

When the rectangle had reached a size approximately sixty by a hundred feet the Venerians stopped carrying soil from the jungle.

After this a new sort of game began to be played. The young girls of the village, their translucent jewelry gleaming at their throats, began to circulate among the young men. They danced for them and sang for them, displayed their breasts and their hair, followed them about the village.

Trooper was surprised to find a doe-eyed Venerian parked outside his hut after his sleep one morning. He blinked at her, his eyes still not accustomed to the glare of the sun.

"Hello," she said. "You are the one they call Troo."

"I am he," Trooper said, "son of Palla, here with my brother Toda."

The girl smiled, her teeth glistening like the baubles around her throat. Trooper noticed that they were set in a single line, curving gracefully about her neck, gleaming brilliantly in the sunlight.

"Are you not sorry to be away from your village at the time of the Planting?" she asked.

Trooper hesitated.

"Or do you find our village a worthy one in which to sow?"

Trooper nodded. "Indeed," he faltered, "it is a worthy one."

The girl smiled again and looked

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shyly at the ground. "I am happy," she said. "I am called Donya and this is my first Season of the Planting."

"It is my first too," Trooper said.

The girl looked up with wonder in her eyes. "Really?" she asked. "Is it really?"

"Why, yes."

"And have you already made arrangements?"

"No. No, I—er—haven't."

The girl lowered her eyes again. "You will consider me bold."

"Why, no, not at all. I think you're very sweet."

She smiled up at him. "I will come to you," she said, then she fled in embarrassment.

When Trooper told Tod what had happened Tod nodded knowingly. "Me, too," he said. "Perhaps there's a sort of festival at the Planting. Perhaps the girls are asking us to escort them or something."

"Sure," Trooper said, snapping his fingers. "I should have realized.

"After all," Tod said, "we are eligible Venerian males, you know."

"Oh, you kid," Trooper said.

## VI

The time of the Planting came the following week. Trooper and Tod stood in the opening of their hut as the men watched the young women dance before them in the circle formed by the huts.

Donya came to Trooper, a secret smile on her face. She knelt before him and lowered her head.

"I come, as I promised."

Trooper nodded.

She rose then and took Trooper's hand in hers. Her hand was cool to the touch. She led him into the darkness of the hut and lowered the flap. She turned then and huddled into his arms. Trooper caressed her cautiously, unfamiliarly.

"You hesitate," she said shyly. "We will learn together."

The afternoon was one of whispered words and fond caresses. Slowly, tenderly, Donya guided Trooper's hands to the glowing spheres at her throat. He didn't know what to do. She closed his fingers on the first sphere, then gently pulled his hand away. The sphere clung to her skin for an instant and then shook loose. Donya gripped him tightly.

They waited and again she guided his fingers to the spheres. One by one they fell loose into his hands.

And then, when all the spheres had been plucked, Donya whispered, "I will wait while you sow."

He lifted the flap and stepped out into the sunshine. Tod met him there and they stared in bewilderment at each other.

They followed the other young men to the new rectangular plot of earth. They watched silently.

The young men gripped the translucent spheres in the palms of their hands, closed their eyes and thrust their fists deeply into the soft soil. When they withdrew their hands the spheres were gone.

Tod turned a glistening, translucent sphere in his fingers. "Trooper," he whispered, "I think

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we have finally found the seed!"

"What?" His mouth fell open.

"The seed, Trooper. This is *it!*"

Trooper stared at the glistening ball for a long time. "No," he said. "You're wrong. The other seed had blue veins beneath the surface."

Tod nodded his head. "The other seeds were fertilized, Trooper."

"Fertilized? What are you saying, Tod? You're talking as if these people were . . ." The word caught in his throat as they approached the rectangular plot. *"Plants."*

They went through the motions, thrusting their hands into the soil, releasing the seeds. Over and over again they repeated the process until all the seeds were in the ground.

Trooper went back to the hut then and Donya was waiting. "And have you sown?" she asked. She touched him with cold fingers.

"Yes," he said, "I have sown."

"Thank you," she murmured, "thank you, thank you!"

Tod and Trooper watched the development of the seeds. After a week, they plucked one from the earth and studied it. A blue network of lines had begun to form beneath the surface of the sphere.

"That bastard," Trooper said. "He wants us to bring back people. *Seeds!* Seeds that grow people!"

"We're not sure," Tod cautioned. "We'll wait and see."

They waited. The weeks dragged into months and the seeds began to sprout. A tall stem at first, then four secondary branches. A large bulb formed slowly at the top of the stem and by the fourth month this bulb had assumed the half-shaped contours of a face. The branches had grown longer, bright blue in color.

Trooper thought back to the sessions in the Hypnobooth, to the garbled sentences the tape had tried to reveal through the scratches.

*. . . after the free-moving stage has been achieved . . .*

This was after the eighth month. The plants seemed to shake themselves free of the soil, emerged as perfect figures.

*. . . pedal extremities no longer . . .*

No longer *what,* Trooper wondered. Why, no longer provide nourishment to the plant, he realized in amazement. The hands became a substitute. And he knew then that the mound in the village was the Venerian method of feeding.

*. . . Venerian soil is . . .*

Venerian soil was the staff of Venerian life—because all Venerian life was plant life.

*. . . and blossoming . . .*

*And blossoming around the throat of the female of the species,* he filled in, *is the precious seed that guarantees preservation of the species.*

And Altz would have them bring these seeds back. So that he could plant them, and use them as robots in his expansion plans.

*People—men to man the weapons and the machines . . .*

And Altz would have them bring back the seed of a slave race, a race to fight the wars. What was it he had said? *. . . a certain mental*

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*attitude is necessary for the job.*

And he and Tod had that mental attitude. Their records showed it.

Bellew and Trupa pondered this together for long hours, the rich boy and the poor boy—the two Altz had thought specially fitted for the job of securing a slave race.

It was difficult at first to break down the walls each had built through the years—difficult to override the pull of inbred instinct—difficult to pour out their emotions to each other, to break the wall of hate and loneliness.

But they turned the problem over, comparing the simple, happy existence these people now led to the one awaiting them on Earth.

They made the only decision possible.

They said their goodbyes the next morning. The young girls, the new crop that was now free-moving, were already beginning to develop tiny translucent spheres around their necks.

The space-suits were where they'd left them. Bellew and Turba dug them up, two men who knew exactly what they were ready to do. The radar units were intact and they sent the signal back to Earth.

The ship came promptly five days later, hovering over the planet like a silver needle in the sky. They adjusted their bubbles, took blasters in hand and turned on the power in their shoulder jets.

The men on the ship were jubilant. "The Commander will blow his top," they shouted. "You'll get medals, both of you."

The two were strangely silent throughout the entire trip. Their skins were beginning to fade back to normal colors. They talked little, answered questions tersely.

When the ship landed on Earth five days later they had subdued the small crew. They dropped them off on the outskirts of New York, bound and gagged, then headed for the Office of the Military.

Commander Altz greeted Bellew and Turba with a broad grin. They wore the clothes the crew had provided for them and their holstered blasters hung at their sides.

"Well," Altz cried. "You made it!"

"We made it," Tod repeated.

"And the seeds—did you get the seeds?"

Trooper's blaster flicked into his hand.

"Wha—?" Altz began.

"Here's the only seed you'll ever know," Trooper said. His finger tightened on the trigger and a searing yellow beam knifed across the room. Tod's blaster echoed Trooper's as Altz dropped to the floor.

They ran to the ship, slammed the hatches, pointed the nose toward the sky.

It streaked out into space, a slim promise, trailing the sparks of a dead civilization. The stars in infinite numbers blinked curiously.

"There must be other worlds," Tod said.

"Better worlds," Trooper said.

They aimed the nose of the ship at one of the curious stars and smiled in the darkness of the cabin.

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# a matter of timing

*by . . . A. Bertram Chandler*

**Timing is the very essence of revolt. Hence, at times, the mere twist of a chronometer hand may turn a revolt to the ridiculous.**

ALL OF US, AT ONE TIME or another, have beguiled ourselves on a long and boring journey by the surreptitious study of our fellow passengers. Some there are who fall into their correct categories with an almost audible click. Others defy classification.

A stranger, seated at ease in the Staff Common Room of Marsala University, could have employed himself in this manner, the while congratulating himself on being a true disciple of the immortal Sherlock Holmes.

But it would hardly have been a fair test of the deductive capabilities of our mythical stranger, for it has been said that life in the Autonomous Martian Republic tends to make one a caricature of one's natural self. Every trait, good or bad, is accentuated. And if you are already crazy—well, you just become crazier.

Perhaps, when the Geophysical Engineers have succeeded in raking up some kind of a reasonably dense atmosphere, have supplemented the dwindling water supply from the Polar ice caps, have in fact made the desert blossom like the rose, it won't be so bad.

But at present it must be considered as bad as serving in one

*It is an oddity of human nature—whatever that may be—that the further people go in time and distance from their native sods, the more tenaciously they cling to the local prejudices of the land from which they sprung. Here Mr. Chandler, in a story set on Mars, considers what such sublimated chauvinism might mean on an alien planet.*



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of those fantastic submarines which were used with such effect in the bad old days of the Twentieth Century, during the Final Wars. Canned air inside the domed cities, canned air if you venture outside on your lawful occasions. It is, definitely, no life for a civilised man. But just as those old incredibly tough submariners would not have exchanged their lot for life in a big surface ship, so the Martian Colonists profess a perverted love for their arid and dying world.

But our hypothetical stranger is fidgeting in his seat. No, he's not bored. He's just having to admit to himself that, perhaps, he could not make an honest living as a great detective after all.

Oh, it was easy at first. The mathematicians looked dry as dust, the artistic and literary instructors looked too artistic for words. The engineers could have sat as models for a portrait of the mythical Buck Rogers.

But two, in all the gathering, would have defeated all attempts at analysis.

One of these seemed to combine the most striking features of actor and evangelist. It is hard to describe the man as, in himself, he was completely undistinguished. Of medium build with mousy hair and neither especial fineness nor strength of feature. And yet—there was something—a subtle quality of voice, gesture and bearing. It was as though he trod the boards of an invisible stage or a non-existent platform.

This was Professor Justin, known to his colleagues as "Ham" Justin or, more simply, "the Ham."

His subject was History.

The other looked completely out of place in a scholastic environment. Tall, he was, with straw yellow hair. He would have looked at home at the tiller of a Viking Dragon ship, pressing west with Leif Ericcson. He was in fact the ideal sailorman of film and fiction, a type very rare in actual fact.

This was Lindenholm, known as "the Commodore," head of the Department of Desert Navigation.

Yes, they navigate on Mars sometimes. When the beam transmitters break down, which they do occasionally, when the big tractors known as "sand-cats" are stalled and blind, for the beams give directional aid as well as power, then the diesel caterpillars are dragged from retirement so that surface traffic shall not be entirely at a standstill.

Just as the ships of old navigated the seas of Earth, so these modern ships of the desert steer a compass course while their pilots take sights with their bubble sextants, plot their Dead Reckoning and in general play at being sailors.

Who should be a better instructor for these dry land mariners than a real sailor? So Lindenholm averred, adding that in the course of his professional duties he did more real navigation than he had ever done as an officer in the service of the World Federation Ocean Transport, whose big freighters ran along the beams as along invisible tramlines, and

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whose highly qualified sea-staff was carried just in case.

Professor Justin was not popular. He affected to despise, as uncultured barbarians, all of the scientific staff. He was the kind of man who is always talking about spiritual values. Yet he had a following. His Historical Society attracted many of the students and citizens who felt that modern life lacked romance.

It was a fact that he could make pages of history, stories of long-forgotten wars, glow with an entirely spurious glamour. Listening to his golden voice one somehow forgot all the misery, all the brutality. One saw only high courage and heroism.

Justin didn't like Lindenholm. Lindenholm instinctively didn't like Justin. Therefore, it was with a certain surprise that "the Commodore" found himself being invited to an evening with the Justins.

"Come along about eight, old man," urged the historian. It was one of his affectations that he never used four-figure twenty-four-hour time. "There'll be just a few kindred spirits from the Historical Society. And"—his voice dropped to a confidential whisper—"I've still got a few bottles of imported liquor in stock."

"I don't know that I can, Professor. I promised Joan that we'd spend a quiet evening at home tonight."

"Bring her along. It's ages since I've seen the dear girl."

Finally Lindenholm consented. He wanted to know what Justin wanted from him.

*And I can always say "No,"* he told himself.

Joan Lindenholm viewed the prospect of an evening spent in the company of the shining lights of the Historical Society with extreme disfavor. "Oh, John," she wailed, "What have you let us in for?"

"A few free drinks, my dear. Rumor has it that the Ham keeps a most excellent cellar. Besides—I'm curious to know what he wants of me."

"Nothing good, you can be sure of that. There's something *wrong* about that man. You know the Lewins?"

"Of course. Seeing that the man's Professor of Economics I can hardly miss seeing him about the place. We must ask them round for dinner some time."

"Never mind that. Miriam Lewin was telling me one or two things about Justin. I'd often wondered why a man of his type should come out here. Now I know why."

"Why?"

"Neo-Romanisim. Justin was mixed up with an ugly outbreak at Canberra University. A Frankish student was almost beaten to death. Justin had to leave."

"Rubbish! A historian, of all people, would never fall for that Neo-Romanic hooey. Was it ever proved?"

"Well—no. Miriam says it was all hushed up."

"Hmm. You'd better tell your girl-friend, honey, not to spread rumors of that kind. I don't suppose

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that there's anything wrong with Justin. It's just the man's manner."

"Maybe. But I'd back my intuition any day."

"So did Cleopatra. You'll be telling us next that the Ham is descended from Julius Caesar."

Surprisingly enough the evening with the Justins proved at first far more pleasant than either of the Lindenholms had dared to anticipate.

When Justin chose to play the genial host he played the part with all the skill of an accomplished actor. One forgot that it was just acting. Perhaps his excellent cellar was responsible for the success of the party.

Magda Justin, a statuesque if somewhat vapid blond, was an elegant and graceful hostess.

It was the guests that piled fuel on the fires of Joan's vague half-formulated suspicions.

They were an odd lot. It looked as though the Historical Society must have recruited its members from amongst the least brilliant of the students, the most unstable of the faculty.

At the beginning of the evening Lindenholm found himself the recipient of dirty looks from one of his own pupils, a sand-cat pilot in his middle thirties who had proved himself a mediocre rule-of-thumb navigator and completely incapable of using such imagination as he possessed.

But this was at the beginning of the evening. Luckily Justin's good liquor promoted amity rather than discord and soon everybody was on terms of glass-clicking intimacy.

Somehow, Lindenholm found himself the center of an interested group to whom he was explaining the problems and principles of desert navigation.

"Yes," he was saying, "we had to have chronometers especially made for this planet. There's a couple of dozen of them in my office, all of them with neat little tickets showing their daily rate and present error, all of them ticking away the hours and minutes of the Martian day. They're my babies."

He intercepted a dirty look from Joan and subsided.

"And what other instruments?" said somebody.

"Oh yes—sextants. Beautiful little jobs. Bubble Horizon—you've got to have that for work ashore—electric light, every modern convenience. A far, far cry, gentlemen, from cross-stave and astrolabe. They're my babies."

"And compasses?" Justin was asking.

"Magnetic—the ancient lōdestone. Entirely independent, gentlemen, of any external power supply. Beautiful little jobs. I've adjusted 'em all with my own fair hands—coefficients A, B, C, D and E. They're my babies."

"But why bother with taking sights and all that if your compasses are so good?"

"You're up against two things that play merry hell with your Dead Reckoning. One is just plain unvarnished bad steering—the other,

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magnetic ruins buried under the sand. Perhaps the Martians could *see* lines of force and liked a certain iridescence in their architecture. But I digress.

"Either bad steering or unanticipated compass errors or"—he looked at Regan, the mediocre unimaginative navigator—"a combination of both factors can put you miles off-course.

"Perhaps D.F. would solve the problem. But these sand-cats are meant to carry passengers and freight, not to serve as peripatetic platforms for a jungle of gadgetry."

He looked at his wife with a certain defiance, added, "So, our pilots must still learn to navigate. They're my—"

Regan coughed. The sentence was left unfinished.

A little later the evening turned musical. Justin possessed a really marvelous collection of recordings, mostly old national airs. One by one, he fed the steel tapes into his gramophone, while his guests beat time to the music or hummed softly to themselves.

Finally a brassy band was playing a definitely catchy march. To the Lindenholms' amazement several of the guests rose to their feet, made as though to stiffen to attention. A low barely-audible whisper came from Justin.

"*No,* you fools. Not in front of these—"

"What *is* this?" enquired Joan, innocently.

"Oh, an old Mediterranean tune. An ancient march or something."

The electric clock on the wall registered 0200. Goodnights had been said, all but two of the guests had gone their several ways. The Lindenholms had attempted to leave but had been pressed to stay and take one for the road.

Perhaps Joan was fey this night. She looked as though she were seeing ghosts, her red hair framing a dead-white face, her green eyes shining with an unearthly light that somehow sent little shivers chasing up and down Lindenholm's spine. He had seen that look before.

It seemed to Joan that the untidy flat, with its empty glasses on tables and chair arms, its ashtrays piled high with cigarette-ends, was peopled with far more than the four who sat at ease, quietly talking.

Ghosts from the distant past crowded the room with almost tangible presences, ghosts alien to the Red Planet, ghosts from the past of Earth.

"I know something of your family history, Lindenholm," Justin was saying. "Big men, your ancestors, all of them. Captains in the Cunard, Commodores of convoys, men who walked their decks with a very real authority. And they lived in spacious days, days before the world was run by committees for this, that and the other.

"*This*—this is the Day of the Little Man. Little men, with little ideas who can tell men like us what to do and when to do it.

"Think back, man, think of the giants of the past—Churchill, Hitler,

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Napoleon, Alexander, Ghengis Khan, Justinian. Yes, there were giants in the old days. And would they have taken orders from the Little Men? Would they hell!"

Joan quoted softly from "The Ballad of the White Horse.

*"These Lords shall light the mystery*
*"Of mastery and victory.*
*"And these ride high in history,*
*"But these shall not return . . ."*

"Why not?" Justin leaned forward, a lock of hair falling over one of his eyes. The other gleamed with an insane light. "Why not? Do you think the men of action, the history makers, will always be content to be mere public servants?

"Your quotation, Mrs. Lindenholm, has set me thinking.

*"For the end of the world was long ago*
*"When the ends of the earth waxed free,*
*"And Rome was sunk in a waste of slaves*
*"And the sun drowned in the sea.*

*"When Caesar's sun fell out of the sky*
*"And whoso hearkened right*
*"Could only hear the plunging*
*"Of the nations in the night . . .*

"When *did* Caesar's sun fall out of the sky? Long ago in count of years, but, from the historical point of view, quite recently. Caesar, and the idea of Caesar, the God Emperor, lingered until the Final Wars. Tsar, Kaiser, and the Divine Emperor still walked the earth until the final triumph of the barbarians. But they were feeble imitations of the old Roman strain—which was why they failed so miserably.

"There was, at the time of the Final Wars, a common misconception that the so-called Western Democracies were the heirs of Roman Civilization. Rubbish! *They* were the barbarians, hammering at the gates of the last strongholds of Rome. How did old Kipling put it?

*"Poor little street-bred people, that vapour and fume and brag . . ."*

"Yes, Caesar and the Roman Empire *did* linger," said Lindenholm, slowly. "But it wasn't until these troublesome ghosts were finally laid that the Common Man came into his own."

"The *Common Man!*" cried Justin. "You're right. The Common Man, demanding the right to decide the destinies of himself and the world, preventing the Overman from reaching his full stature.

"What have we now? Cautious colonization of Venus and Mars, even more cautious exploration of the Outer Worlds. No great drives from Earth to the nearer stars, no real attempts to plant our flag even on the moons of Jupiter. No! Before anything is done the Common Man must be assured of three squares a day, a full night's sleep, a thirty-hour week and first-class entertainment for his leisure time

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on whatever world he is called to colonize.

"And then, suppose that after all these years of safety-first research the Interstellar Drive *is* perfected, what then? An expedition lands on one of the worlds of Proxima Centauri, finds intelligent life. Will they say, 'This is *our* world, by right of conquest,' and proceed to make it so? Not they! They'll make treaties, trade agreements, eat dirt rather than shed the blood of one human or alien rabbit.

"But—the Day of the Common Man is almost done. The Caesars are coming back into their own."

"You don't mean . . .?"

"Yes. I'll tell you now.

"That babbling wench Miriam Lewin may have told you that I was high in the Councils of the Neo-Romanics. She had the truth but not all of the truth.

"Perhaps a certain physical resemblance may not have escaped you, a certain magnetism. Lindenholm, I claim direct descent from the last and greatest of the Caesars!"

*If you come to Mars sane, you go mad,* thought the Commodore grimly. *If you come here already mad . . .*

"There is a straight line of descent," continued Justin. "After the fall, because of treachery within its gates, of the Roman Empire, usurpers seized the throne. But through many vicissitudes the line was held intact. However, why should I bore you with family history? It must be obvious to you."

"Shall we be leaving, John?" Joan asked, coldly. "I think we'd better before *you* start walking invisible quarterdecks and brandishing imaginary cutlasses."

Incredulity struggled with rage on Justin's face. "You don't believe," he muttered. "You don't believe . . ."

Then, "Don't you realize, Madam, that I had big things in store for your husband? He was to be Admiral of my Desert Navy. He still can be. But you, woman, I advise to hold your tongue."

"That's quite enough, Ham Justin!" Lindenholm slowly lowered his clenched fist. "But this is hardly seemly. We're none of us sober. So we'll thank you for the nice party and say goodnight."

"You'll pay for that name, you jumped-up sailor."

Livid with rage Justin raised a whistle to his lips, blew a peculiarly piercing blast.

From the next room stepped two men.

"My God!" cried Joan, almost hysterically. "Togas, tunics, helmets and all!"

"By now, my Neo-Romanics should be in charge of the city," remarked Justin in a conversational voice.

The lights went out for a moment and for a brief but anxious second the dull thumping of the air compressors stopped. Dimmer, the lights came on again and the mechanical heart of Marsala resumed its steady beat.

"That will be my saboteurs at work in Port Gregory. Oh, nothing seri-

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ous, just a speck of U-two hundred thirty-five out of control at the Power Station. It only means that the beams are down, that all land and air transport is paralyzed for the next two or three days. All the cities have ample power in their storage cells for light, heat and the compressors. But if they refuse to come to heel, theyll have to run on their batteries for a long, long time."

"What, precisely, are you playing at, Justin?"

One of the togaed guards looked at Lindenholm viciously, his finger tightening on the trigger of his anachronistically modern but deadly automatic.

"Call the boss 'Caesar'!" he snarled.

"Never mind that now, Caius. He will be—er—disciplined later," said Justin. "I don't know whether you have studied history, Lindenholm, but you must remember that the success of the first and last Caesars was due to one thing—timing.

"*Martian Maid* blasted off for Earth yesterday, the next ship isn't due for months. We can wash out all possibility of terrestrial interference, especially since the big transmitter at Port Gregory has conveniently broken down. No, that's not my work, it's just chance. But I have to strike before they can get it fixed.

"At noon tomorrow a convoy of diesel sand-cats will leave for the capital. They will be the only transport moving on Mars. They will be full of my men, of arms we have seized from the Canal Police Arsenal, plus arms my mechanics have made.

"Yes, arms that my men have made. Has it ever struck you how effective for street fighting crossbows would be, especially crossbows made from high-grade modern materials?

"But here is the big joke, Lindenholm. My forces will be received without suspicion because my lads in the radio office have already notified Port Gregory that the Commodore will be taking his bright students for an instructional run. Port Gregory, unprepared and unarmed, will fall.

"And the Eagles will wave over the capital, the spaceport, the power station, over almost the only transport on Mars independent of the beams. Are you with me, Lindenholm?"

"Why ask?"

"Oh, well, you're not essential. Regan can be my Admiral. But I want your chronometers. The ones in the Observatory were smashed when the staff was liquidated.

"Caius, Malley, keep the lady and gentleman covered while they lead us to the Commodore's office. Remember if they turn awkward, *shoot the lady*. We *must* have Lindenholm to work that fancy acoustic lock of his with his own sweet voice."

*This is fantastic,* thought Lindenholm as, followed by Justin and the guards, he and Jean made their way along the interminable corridors.

Fantastic it was—and horrible.

While they had been sitting,

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prisoners, in Justin's apartment, the muffled sounds of firing and shouting had reached them but even so they were not prepared for the evidence of slaughter that confronted them with almost every step.

The plastic walls were chipped and scarred by bullets and bolts and there were frequent viscid glistening pools of slowly congealing blood. Some tidy person had fortunately removed the corpses.

Even so Lindenholm shuddered. He could imagine the wave of terror that had engulfed the placid university city, the paying off of old scores, the fate of the girls who, having in the past spurned the advances of the Neo-Romanic louts, had provided the raw material for outrages.

*If Joan . . .* He pushed the thought to the back of his mind, where it remained, about as inconspicuous as a raging toothache.

But they kept on, Lindenholm and Joan making wide detours to avoid the revolting puddles which the three Neo-Romanics marched right through, leaving a long and loathsome trail of darkening red footprints.

At last they came to the door with its gold lettering—PROFESSOR JOHN LINDENHOLM—DEPARTMENT OF DESERT NAVIGATION.

"Well, here we are." Lindenholm forced a smile.

At the same time, as casually as possible, he surveyed the positions in which the members of the party were standing. *It's a risk. But I must take it,* he thought.

He brought his mouth close to the funnel of the acoustic lock, strove to make the tone of his voice as normal as possible. He murmured the words, magic words straight from one of mankind's oldest fairy stories.

"Open, Sesame!"

Something clicked, and the door slid slowly to one side.

Acoustic locks were still a novelty. Lindenholm had banked on this.

In the fraction of a second, during which the guards were watching the magic door with ill-concealed interest, he acted.

With one hand he roughly shoved Joan into the widening space, with the other he grabbed the arm of the man who was covering her. Caught off balance the guard fell in front of Justin and his companion.

As Lindenholm slammed the door from the inside guns were going off—but he knew that the tough plastic would stop anything short of a six-inch shell.

Spring locks of any kind are intensely annoying things when one is on the wrong side of the door with no key. But Justin had a key—perhaps. He knew the words. If he could succeed in imitating Lindenholm's intonation with sufficient fidelity the door would open.

And the lock had no catch.

Worse still, long and patient work with the proper tools was needed to make a really first-class job of jamming.

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Lindenholm had to act—and fast.

He ran to the large cabinet in which his twenty-four working chronometers were unconcernedly ticking away the seconds of the Martian day; ticking away the last few hours of sanity on the Red Planet.

With trembling fingers he unscrewed the glass face cover of the first of the timepieces. A slight retarding pressure on its hands stopped it.

"You can help with this, girl. Just do the same as I'm doing. If they get the door open before we've finished just smash 'em. But *don't* touch the two in the small cabinet, or we're sunk!"

Leaving his wife to deal with the chronometers Lindenholm pulled a key from his pocket, ran to a small locked box mounted on the wall below the big electric clock. He looked at what were to be the two sole survivors, then unlocked the box and made a hurried adjustment.

They needn't have hurried.

All but two of the chronometers were stopped, two slips of pasteboard had been destroyed and replaced, before the lock finally yielded to the Ham's histrionic skill and opened slowly.

Lindenholm could act, too. When the Neo-Romanics burst in, their numbers augmented by the addition of Regan and sundry guards, he was bending over the large cabinet, apparently stopping the last chronometer.

"Don't shoot!" roared Justin. "You might break his blasted clocks!" Rough hands pulled the Commodore away from the cabinet. Justin and Regan rushed to inspect the damage.

"He's stopped them all!" wailed the Admiral of the Neo-Romanic Desert Navy.

"No he hasn't!" bellowed a guard. "There's two in this cabinet still going!"

"You are a fool, Lindenholm," remarked Justin. "A sentimental fool. I am glad now that you did not enter my service. There is no room for softness in the ranks of the Neo-Romanics.

"You could have smashed those clocks in the time you had—in one quarter of the time. But I knew you wouldn't—'They're my babies.'"

The mimicry was so perfect that Lindenholm squirmed.

"Well, here are your chronometers, Admiral. I take it you can get the others restarted. Oh, these two are the Master Chronometers, are they? Then they should do. Prepare my ships of the desert for the assault on the capital!

"As for you!" He turned a mask of animal fury to the captives. "Take them away, men. Put them in the southern airlock with the other prisoners. I shall mete out justice on the return of my victorious forces from Port Gregory."

There were many familiar faces in the crowd in the airlock. There were many faces missing. Some of these may have perished in the fighting, some were doubtless in the ranks of Neo-Romanics.

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But all the faces bore the same expression although in different degrees. Frankly all were scared stiff but some were more successful in concealing it than others.

The conduct of the guards was not conducive to the peace of mind of the captives. These gentlemen, secure behind many inches of steel and plastic, were amusing themselves by opening the vents leading to the thin outer air, first bringing the prisoners to the very verge of asphyxiation, then increasing the pressure to Earth-normal.

"The one thing that worries me, honey," gasped Lindenholm after one such session, "is what those apes out there are going to do when His Excellency and his victorious navy don't return. They *might* let us out and throw themselves on our mercy but I can't see 'em doing it. They're hysterical types and their most likely course of action is to finish us all off and then fight it out with whatever forces are sent from Port Gregory.

"Anyhow, we shall have had the satisfaction of doing for friend Justin!"

"What do you mean?" demanded a grey middle-aged man, dressed like some sort of mechanic.

"Sorry, friend, I daren't tell you. They may have listening devices in the walls or flooring. They may have stool pigeons among us. You might be one. No offence."

"No, Commodore, I understand."

"Thank you. But I'll be a lot happier if you stay with us now so we can keep an eye on you. I *think* I could stand a spot of Third Degree myself but if they tried it on Joan, here, I'd blab if the fate of the entire universe depended on it!"

The big electric clock on the airlock walls remorselessly measured off what most of the captives regarded as their last few hours. Night came but no sleep. There was literally no room to lie down. Had it not been for the excellent air-conditioning system possessed by all Martian cities the prison would rapidly have become a new and more dreadful Black Hole of Calcutta.

Morning came and with it a sudden morbid burst of interest in the progress of the Neo-Romanic Desert Navy.

"Sixty miles an hour those diesel sand-cats do. They should be in Morristown by thirteen-hundred."

"Do you think the Police'll be able to do anything about it?"

"Not a hope. They've had no warning. In any case the city's probably crawling with Romanic agents. If you ask me, brother, our best bet when Justin comes back is to join his party."

"All right for you, you square-head, but what the hell chance do I stand after killing a couple of them?"

Another voice broke in. "But what will the World Federation do?"

"Sweet damn all! It's all a matter of superb timing on Justin's part. I'm a doctor and I happen to know that they have just succeeded in extracting a new drug from those

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weeds we grow—yes, the dear old familiar Martian Tobacco!

"Justin need only threaten to destroy the crops, and the Federation will be eating out of his hand."

"But why?"

"Why? My dear sir, what will be the fate of any government that deliberately throws away the first absolutely safe and sure cancer cure? There are Neo-Romanics on Earth too, you know, and they'll spread the news fast enough, never fear!"

Yet another voice broke in, this time from the speaker of the public communications system.

"Stand back from the inner doors, everybody. Stand well back. The Neo-Romanics have destroyed the opening machinery. They tried to open the outer doors but we stopped them in time. We are going to blast. *We—are—going—to—blast.* Stand well back!"

The explosion, when it came, was anti-climactic, an almost inaudible thud. The inner doors swung slowly open.

The first man through was Simon Lewin, one-time Professor of Economics, now a Captain of Frankish guerillas. In his right hand he brandished a large pistol, in his belt was a knife. Its blade was no longer bright. Behind him came others, some with Neo-Romanic crossbows, some wounded.

"Any radio technicians here?" he called. "The rats wrecked the station before we got them and we must warn Port Gregory!"

Six men stepped forward.

"Good. Do what you can as fast as you can!"

"Glad to see you're still alive and kicking, Simon!" Lindenholm pushed through the excited crowd, hand outstretched.

"Glad to see you and Joan are too."

"How in hell did you manage it?"

"Just luck. Miriam and I were spending an evening with the Claytons. On occasions like this there's a lot to be said for having the Chief Air-Conditioning Engineer as one's host! He knows all the trunks like the palm of his own hand.

"Well, we went underground in the ventilators, raided the M.C.P. arsenal, gathered reinforcements here and there—and here—we are!"

His face darkened. "But that was a bad show of yours with the chronometers, Commodore. You should have smashed 'em!"

"So Justin told me. How right he was! But how did you find out?"

"Oh, we took *some* prisoners. But let's get on up to the radio office."

The atmosphere at Communications was that of a race against time. At this end there were merely a half dozen men feverishly rewiring, soldering, replacing smashed tubes.

At the other end—Lewin saw in his mind's eye a cavalcade of speeding tractors, the Eagle standard flaunting from the leader, rumbling ever closer to the unsuspecting city of Port Gregory.

They had left at noon. Fifteen

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hundred Martian miles—sixty miles an hour—twenty-five hours.

The time was now 1230.

Half an hour to get the transmitter working.

At the end of that half hour, unless the warning got through, the great gates of the Port Gregory airlock would swing open and the sand-cats pour into the city.

Lewin turned on Lindenholm savagely. "Damn you, Commodore! Don't sit there grinning to yourself! Don't you realize, man, that whoever holds the Power Station holds Mars? Once Justin and his thugs get Port Gregory they can bring every city to its knees! Why, oh why, didn't you smash those blasted clocks?"

"It wouldn't have made much difference. As far as I know, and I've surveyed the route, there are no magnetic ruins or deposits between here and Port Gregory. And it's only a short run. 'Admiral' Regan could have done it easily enough on Dead Reckoning."

He lightly tapped a cigarette on his thumbnail until it ignited, then sat back as though he hadn't a care in the world.

1255.

One of the technicians was either very careless or very clumsy or both. Or else . . .

Twice he had dropped and smashed spare tubes, once burned out a newly-wired circuit.

Lindenholm watched him with narrowed eyes.

Lewin paced the room nervously, cursing aloud at each fresh delay.

The minute hand crept on.

1259.

"At last!" cried Lewin. "Get that message out!"

"Get him first!" bellowed Lindenholm, pointing at the clumsy technician. "He's going to gum up the works again!"

And while all eyes were focussed on the brawl round the alleged Neo-Romanic, whose only crime was clumsiness, one long stride took the Commodore to the operator's chair, one lightning movement of his fist knocked the operator spinning and out cold.

"You can send, now," he said. "There's no hurry. Just tell them that the Neo-Romanic Navy is probably running round in circles some ninety-five miles east of Port Gregory."

"How did you know?" asked Lewin a minute or so later. "Port Gregory says they've seen nothing of Justin.

"Oh, just a matter of timing. But I'd better explain.

"First, I must apologize for leaving you all in the dark. I had to. I didn't dare breathe a word till you were able to get the warning out. For all we know there are secret transmitters in the city. And not all of the Neo-Romanics are prancing around in togas and tunics.

"There were quite a few planted among the prisoners as spies—like our friend here. I hope I've broken his jaw. He was among the guests at Justin's party.

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"Well, Simon, you reproached me for not smashing my precious chronometers. I could have done so but that would have left no excuse for leaving two running.

"And those two? No, they weren't faulty, they were my best clocks, my Master Chronometers. I hope I get them back.

"Have you ever pondered the relative nature of time? Here on Mars a minute's a minute and a second's a second. Even if you were straight out from Earth you'd hardly notice any difference. After all, twenty-four over twenty-four-point-six is as near one as makes no difference.

"Yes, those two Master Chronometers of mine weren't made to keep Marsala Mean Time. They were made for G.M.T. Which means, of course, that relative to *our* time they were gaining about thirty-seven minutes daily. Which is quite a hefty rate.

"Now the element of chance enters. It so happens that today was one of the days when G.M.T. and M.M.T. coincided. As we use twelve-hour dials on our chronometers, this happy event occurs at twenty-day intervals.

"Try to visualise it. Imagine M.M.T. as the hour hand of a clock, G.M.T. as the minute hand, sweeping round, coinciding and passing. Get it?

"Well, that gave me an idea. Had I tinkered with the Accumulated Error cards of the working chronometers there was always the chance that even Regan might have the savvy to check up by astronomical observations.

"And had you not got the warning out the Neo-Romanic Desert Navy would finally have got its bearings and staggered into Port Gregory more than somewhat overdue. But I wanted to lose them in the desert for keeps. They haven't got the tables for navigating with G.M.T. chronometers.

"When Joan and I were locked in my office we carefully stopped all the M.M.T. timepieces. The next move was to put the city on G.M.T. Not many people know but there are two master clocks, one in the Observatory, the other in my sanctum. Hoping that nobody would notice I carefully retarded the clock to agree with the chronometers. Then it was set to gain thirty-seven minutes daily. So you see you needn't have been in such a ruddy blush over the radio!

"But here is what happened—Port Gregory is due noth of Marsala and I have assumed that 'Admiral' Regan, our Master Navigator, has laid off a course of zero degrees. Now, in cases such as this, when you've had a daylight run in nice clear weather, no dust storms or anything cosmic, you don't bother with evening observations. You can always look astern at your track and see if you've made a good course.

"Of course it's at night that people wander. There are bad steering and deviations caused by magnetic ruins, if any. You have to stop in any case to get azimuths to check your

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compass error and I doubt if Regan would bother.

"So the Desert Navy ploughs on through the night, with all those not on duty dreaming dreams of power and pillage.

"Just before dawn, however, the Grand Ham decides that it's time that his Lord High Admiral does his stuff.

"So the fleet is hove to and an admiring crowd gathers to watch the astute and egregious Regan shoot a star or two.

"By this time the metaphorical minute hand has overtaken the hour hand and G.M.T. is roughly seven minutes fast of M.M.T. All of which means that when the Master Navigator does his sums he finds himself practically on his D.R. latitude—but away to hell and gone to the west'ard. Oh, it's quite possible after a twelve-hour night run, *if* you've been the victim of any fancy deviations.

"Anyhow, Regan is the type who would never dream of doubting his own calculations and observations. So what does he do? Why, he alters course to, I should say, about 013°.

"At thirteen hundred, when Port Gregory should be falling to the vanguard of the New Order, the Grand Ham will be considering firing, or shooting, his Admiral.

"For what do they see? Not the dome of the capital—that will be about a hundred miles to the west-'ard. Just sand, sand and still more sand.

"There was no chance of their striking the canal, which runs in from the northwest and runs out sou'westerly."

Lindenholm lit a cigarette, inhaled contentedly. "So you see it was all a matter of timing."

*Once man has actually succeeded in extending his living quarters to other planets, we wonder what his status will be. Granted some sort of successful colonization, however limited, will emigrants from Earth be considered colonials, fellow citizens or what? To what sort of government controls will they be subject?*

*The greatest single colonization feat in history was the settling of the Americas by emigrants from Western Europe. Less than two centuries ago the entire Western Hemisphere belonged at least nominally to England, Spain, France, Holland and Denmark. Today, save for Canada, which has Commonwealth status, British Honduras, the Guianas and most of the West Indies, it is free of European control. If the fatherlands of Western Europe, at the very peak of their powers, found it impossible to maintain control of their colonies across a mere 3,000 miles of ocean, how are the governors of Earth going to keep even a loose rein upon settlers on alien planets across tens of millions of miles of space?*

*The answer, of course, is that they won't be able to do so. But we have a definite hunch that, human avarice being what it is, it's going to take them long and perhaps bloody years to find it out. Which currently provides food for countless stf fictions that will some day be true chronicles of Odyssies and Iliads of the future.*

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# the disintegrating sky

*by . . . . Poul Anderson*

**Sometimes, out of the most fanciful talk of men, stark ultimate reality may stand fully revealed.**

CLIFF BRONSON'S apartment was very like himself. It was furnished in quiet good taste, a little archaic in its heavy dark furniture and the fireplace, where small flames sputtered and sang and beat ruddy fists against the soft lamplight. There were shelves of records, the old masters of music, and the walls were lined with well-worn copies of the world's great literature, from Aeschylus to Guthrie.

But among the records were also to be found the sinister discords of Stravinsky and Berlioz along with the latest better popular releases. And some very curious and disquieting volumes nestled amongst Shakespeare and Goethe and Voltaire. Across the room Frans Hals' sardonic Jester leered at a recent Dali. The arrangement seemed deliberate, perhaps symbolic.

There was a broad window looking down the precipitous wall to the million winking blazing lights of New York. Reality surfed its remote thunder against the room. But within its walls the urgent and immediate were lost. The costly radio-television was turned off. Its voice could not blare of the latest step toward a war that now could only be weeks or days away. Its speaker breathed out the languid recorded tones of Delius, rest and forgetfulness beside

*Most of us, like Mr. Anderson in this story, have occasionally speculated on the nature of Truth. Perhaps, unlike Bronson and his friends, it is a good thing all around that none of us has found the answer. For Truth can be a terrible thing.*



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drowsy streams, a pastoral peace that had perhaps never really existed.

Not the least advantage of Bronson's comfortable bachelorhood was the freedom to hold all-night conversation with those he found interesting. He liked to bring together minds as diverse as he could locate and let them clash over whisky and cigars, while he remained the amused host-spectator with only an occasional carefully polished interjection.

Tonight he had invited Raymond Burkhardt and Carl Gray. There was also a new acquaintance of his, Bernie Cogswell, but he was proving a disappointment. He slumped in a deep chair, clutching his glass as a child might grip its mother's hand, saying little more than politeness required. The eyes were haunted in his haggard young face.

Bronson had hoped that Cogswell might tell them a little of the latest nuclear bomb project with which, as a physicist, he had a minor association. At the very least he might have applied some good positivistic philosophy to the present argument. But no such luck.

However, Burkhardt and Gray were making up for it. They had drifted into a debate which was delightfully remote from the urgencies of the present, and their words were the very images of their minds. They were two mutually alien human types who had locked horns and would never conceivably reach agreement.

Gray was an executive in one of the larger manufacturing corporations, hard-headed, a stickler for facts—but he was not without imagination, was the only conservative Bronson could recall meeting who could make a really good case for his side.

Burkhardt was a sculptor, mildly prosperous since his weird creations had begun enjoying a certain vogue—a dreamer, a poet, an avowed mystic—yet well versed in the logical method which he professed to scorn.

Bronson felt a little like a playwright—or, better, a novelist on the order of Thomas Mann, selecting his characters from absolute types and then setting them free to argue it out. With occasional steering from himself, of course. Now if only Cogswell would be a little more cooperative . . .

"But how do you *know?*" Gray insisted. "How can you prove it?"

"How do you know you're sitting in a chair and not in the arms of an octopus? Prove that," replied Burkhardt.

"Well—I can see that, feel it . . ."

"Right! You use your senses. You experience the chair directly. In the same way I experienced this knowledge directly."

"But look here. We're all sane and reasonable men—I think. We'll all agree that this is a chair. But since nobody will agree with you, since nobody claims to have had the same experience, isn't it more reasonable to suppose it purely subjective—a dream, an hallucination?"

"Suppose I were the only man in the world with eyes. Would you

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then claim that light and color were no more than mere hallucinations of mine?"

"There would be ways to check on it, just as we can check the existence of radio waves without being able to see them. But how can anyone check on your statement that we're all merely characters in a book?"

"By having the same experience. By opening your eyes. Anyway, I didn't claim we were all characters of some supercosmic author. That's an oversimplification."

"Isn't your idea essentially Berkeleyan?" suggested Bronson. "Aren't you claiming that all reality exists only as a perception or thought in the mind of God?"

"Not that either," said Burkhardt. "It—it's hard to put into words. It came on me all at once, in that dreamy half-reverie just before you fall asleep. I had been reading Berkeley, yes, and suppose that's what triggered this in my mind. But it is something different."

"'It's all my own invention,'" murmered Bronson.

"I was wondering about the flow of time," said Burkhardt. "Why do we all perceive time as flowing in the same direction? What becomes of the past? What is the future and why can't we know it as we know the past? Simply because it doesn't exist yet?"

"Seems like a scientific question," said Bronson. "What do you think about it, Bernie?"

"Eh?" Cogswell stirred and blinked abstractedly at them. "Pardon me, I didn't quite get the gist of the last remark."

"What's the nature of time?"

"Why — nobody really knows. According to relativity, of course, time is simply one dimension in a four-dimensional continuum. The past and the future are equally real and fixed. But of course wave-mechanics and the uncertainty principle may throw a little doubt on that theory."

"Why do we see time as flowing instead of static?" asked Gray.

Cogswell shrugged. "Why knows? We just do. Some authorities have suggested that the time-direction is the direction of increase of entropy. But somehow I've never been satisfied with that theory, perhaps because it's so vague."

Burkhardt looked triumphant. "I say we move from past to future because the Author is writing all the time. The movement of time is the movement of—of his pen, to make a very crude analogy. The future has not yet been written. The present is what he's writing this instant. The past is what he has already written."

"And he never rewrites," said Bronson with a wry smile. "'*The moving finger writes, and having writ . . .*'"

"If he does rewrite," said Gray with the air of a man descending to a child's make-believe, "in the very nature of the case we'd never know it." Then, a little angrily, "But that's all nonsense. You're saying we aren't real, that we're just figments of some enormous being's imagina-

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tion. But damn it, I *know* I'm real. As you'd say, Burkhardt, it's a matter of direct experience."

"Of course it is," said Burkhardt patiently. "I'm not denying that we're real I'm simply explaining *how* we are. This table isn't less heavy because science has shown that it's built up of atoms which are mostly empty space. The heaviness has been explained, not explained away. That's all I'm trying to do with reality."

"Then everything is being written by a great Author—but who's going to read it?" asked Gray.

"Wait a minute," said Bronson. The fantasy amused him — he wanted to carry it to its logical conclusion. "Who said that all the universe is the work of one writer? It looks more reasonable to me that each inhabited planet—and there must be many of them in the cosmos—is the work of one of these creatures.

"Then there'd be a lot of them, you see, some of which aren't authors and can pay in whatever unimaginable currency they have to see what the writers have done. This is the Book of Earth. There must be many other novels."

"What about planets without intelligent life?" snorted Gray.

"Oh, call them the scrawlings of children. Later on, as they grow up, they'll be able to do characterization." Bronson looked into his empty glass and got up. "Who wants another shot?"

There was a moment while whisky and soda were being poured and the men resettled themselves. The fire burned low on the hearth, little ghosts of flame dancing among the cinders. Outside the window the night flared and glittered.

"In a way it's a comforting thought," said Gray. "It would mean that something greater and wiser than ourselves was in existence, a higher order of reality, which will go on forever, whatever may happen to us. But it's damned hard on the human ego. Makes us seem so very futile."

"You realize, of course," said Burkhardt, "that it's the Author who's putting those thoughts in your head."

"I certainly do not," snapped Gray. "Hell, if Earth were a book things would happen a lot more sensibly than they really do."

Bronson smiled again and blew smoke rings. "Not necessarily," he said. "We've got a very young writer. He doesn't know the first thing about the principles of literature. The majority of his characters are dull and stupid. He doesn't have a plot, just a long meaningless narrative broken by melodramatic catastrophes.

"The few really great events lead merely to piddling anticlimaxes—with no feeling whatsoever for the dramatic unities. Earth's history reads like the magnum opus of a romantic fourteen-year-old."

"I hope everything he ever writes is rejected," muttered Cogswell with bitterness.

"I don't think so," said Burkhardt. "He has elements of genius.

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Once in a while he'll come up with a character or a situation that is absolutely sublime—a Christ, a Shakespeare, a Beethoven, an Einstein, the discovery of fire or of America. Oh, he'll go far when he's mastered his technique. He's just starting. Give him time."

"Time to write some other planet, maybe," said Cogswell. "But *we're* the early effort, the botched manuscript. I think he's tired of us."

They looked at him with something of the layman's superstitious awe for the Scientist with a capital S. Cogswell was a little drunk. His smile was crooked and an unruly forelock flopped over his moist skin toward haggard eyes.

"I'm not supposed to know this," he said with the slow precision of intoxication. "I'm just a very little shot on the project, not big enough to rate a guard or a gag. But things leak out here and there, tiny pieces of information that can be put together if you know how.

"And, brethren, the total-disintegration bomb is no longer a theory. It has been built. We're making dozens. And *they* are too."

There was a long moment of a silence that thrummed like a dynamo. Bronson scowled. He hated to be reminded of the unpleasantness outside. There were too many reminders these days.

"It's going to be used," said Cogswell. "It's going to be used because neither side will dare stand by in the fear that the other will cut loose all at once. And just what happens when matter is converted one hundred percent into energy by the ton —nobody knows. My guess is that it will touch off disintegration in the earth's crust. I made some calculations . . ."

Bronson got up and walked over to the window. He stood looking down at the hectic night. His smile was a desperate attempt at restoring the broken mood of gay unreality. "It will at least be a spectacular way to go out," he said.

"Sure!" Cogswell's laugh was brittle. "The most melodramatic way you can imagine. Isn't it just the way your adolescent Author would choose? To hell with winding up all the million loose ends in a story that has begun to bore him. Wipe 'em all out, let every blasted one of his characters go up in flame, start on something more interesting!"

Sweat gleamed suddenly on Bronson's face. "You know," he said, "you know, if I'd written such a book back in my teens and got fed up with it, I would have taken a few of my characters just before the end and make them realize what they were—characters in a poorly-written novel, out of my own mind.

"It would have been my way of expressing my disgust with their mechanicalness, their unrealness, their unsatisfactoriness. And then I'd have written a flaming finis."

They stared at him and he stood looking out the window. Faraway and faintly the scream of sirens came to him and the lights started to go out. He saw rocket flames cut their fiery trails across the disintegrating sky.

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# the instant of now

*by . . . . Irving E. Cox, Jr.*

**Revolution is not necessarily a noble thing. Unless shrewdly directed, its best elements may fall victim to its basest impulses.**

EDDIE DIRRUL had destroyed the message seconds after reading it. Yet, as he left the pneumotube from the University, he felt as if it were burning a hole in his pocket. It had come to him from Paul Sorgel, the new top-agent from the Planet Vinin. It has been written in High Vininese.

For a moment the alien language had slowed Eddie's reaction to its contents, as had the shocking nature of its words. It had read—

*Need your help. Glenna and Hurd in brush with Secret Police—both hurt. Come at once.*

Luckily old Dr. Kramer had asked no awkward questions when Eddie excused himself from the balance of the lecture. If the kindly bumbling professor had been inquisitive, Eddie had no idea how he would have answered. Glenna was his fiancée, Hurd his best friend—and their disaster meant disaster for the underground movement that had become the guiding purpose of his entire life.

The night was still young when he emerged from the pneumotube and the slanting ramp-lines of windows in the massive unit-blocks of the Workers' Suburb rose about

*One of the most intriguing of all science fiction patterns is that of the galactic sweep—the story which takes for granted human travel between stars at speeds far faster than the speed of light. In its most successful form, such a story combines cosmic action with a wholly human plot. In this case Mr. Cox—but read it yourself.*



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him within the darkness of the structural frames that encased them.

Parks, recreation centers and gaudy amusement halls were aswirl with the usual evening crowds. With a sort of angry heedlessness Eddie forced his way among tall perpetually-youthful men in bright leisure clothing—and consciously alluring women clad in filmy garments as teasingly transparent as mist.

*Glenna hurt—and Hurd!* Seriously, of course, or Paul Sorgel would never have risked a hand-message. With quiet desperation he pushed through the crowds—in his trim grey Air-command uniform he was one with them, a nonentity like themselves.

He knew where to find the three he sought. Beyond the outdoor courts, where his fellow-Agronians amused themselves with a variety of racquet-games, lay a tiny park, wherein a state of wild disorder was carefuly maintained in imitation of nature.

Few were attracted by its rugged growth, save in very warm weather, when hardy souls ventured within its borders to relax in artificial breezes created by silent concealed fans. In its center stood a small stone building that housed the maintenance machinery. It was deserted, except for once each year when the city engineering crews came to check the machines and to make minor repairs. There the Libero-Freedom Movement held its meetings, in the shadow of the whirring wheels.

Sorgel came out of the shadows as Dirrul pushed through the thicket of brush that surrounded the stone building. In a hushed whisper he asked, "That you, Eddie?"

"Yes—where are they?"

"Inside. I gave them a hypo—they're both under now. It makes it easier."

"How did it happen, Paul?"

"I was to meet Glenna and Hurd at her apartment, to talk over the details of the Plan. The police were there ahead of me but I broke up the party before they could finish the job. Since they've got to do this sort of thing unofficially, to be able to deny it later if any questions are asked, I scared them off easily enough. I brought Glenna and Hurd here in my Unicyl but I'll need your help to get them out."

"This is the second time it's happened, Paul!" said Eddie. "And the Plan—we'll have to organize all over again. As soon as our people hear about this most of them will run like scared rabbits."

"Not if they don't know, Eddie. That's where you come in. We've got to get Glenna and Hurd away from Agron. If there's no evidence of a crime there's no reason for an investigation."

"But what can I do?"

"Borrow one of the Air-command's surface jets for awhile."

Paul Sorgel's plan was simple and efficient. The Air-Command field was fenced with electronic paralysis barriers and the entrance was heavily guarded. But no watch was kept inside the encampment except for a daily inspection of the machines

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when the guard was changed at dawn. Since Dirrul was a Captain of the Space-maintenance Division, 73rd Air-Command Wing, he was able to enter the area at any time without question. Among the scheduled night training flights for new cadets, the departure of one more surface jet would pass unobserved.

"Come back here for Glenna and Hurd," Sorgel said, "and take them out to the South Desert. If there's no hitch you should be back before dawn, with time to spare. If not . . ." Sorgel shrugged. "Eddie, we can't build a better universe without taking occasional risks."

Slowly Dirrul's body tensed with fear. In a cold dead voice he asked, "Am I to leave them there, without help or medicine, to die of thirst and hunger?"

"Many sacrifices are necessary for the good of the Movement."

"But Glenna and Hurd are our leaders!"

"The freedom of the universe means a little more, I think, than the temporary safety of two individuals." Sorgel lit a cigarette. In the faint pink reflection of the Glo-Wave lighter his face was emptily placid, a faint smile twisting the corners of his lips. "Suppose I say it's a command, Dirrul—a Vininese command, calling for Vininese discipline."

After a moment Dirrul replied in a choked whisper, "I'll take them, sir."

Sorgel smiled and the crisp tone of authority edged out of his voice. "As a matter of fact, Eddie, I was curious to see what you would do. The Vininese Confederacy practises neither cruelty nor deception. You'll find one of our Space-dragons hidden in a gorge of the Katskain Range. It's the ship I came in a week ago.

"The pilot was instructed to wait fifteen planetary revolutions in the event that I might have a report to send back to Headquarters. You must learn to trust me, Eddie. From the first, you see, I intended to send Glenna and Hurd to Vinin. If they get there in time there's a chance our Medical Corps can pull them through. They may even be back here with us for the day when we carry out the Plan."

Dirrul was in no real danger. Much as it benefited the Movement the laxity of Agronian security was one of the chief reasons why Dirrul scorned the Planetary Union. The space-wide patrols of the Air-Command, the city guards and the electronic paralysis barricades created a feeling of internal control—but it was all a glittering sham. If it were not for the Nuclear Beams the whole system would long since have crumbled under the first pressure from outside.

With no difficulty he picked up Glenna and Hurd and took them to the South Desert, where he put them aboard the sleek Vininese space-ship. It was one of the new Dragon design—compact, efficient, faster than anything built by the Planetary Union, protected by sixteen circular batteries and yet small enough to be handled by one man.

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Dirrul had seen only one other Vininese Space-dragon and that from a distance at the Agronian commercial airport, when the last Vininese ambassador arrived. Technically there was no reason why Paul Sorgel could not have landed there as well, except that the Customs questionnaire might have proved embarrassing.

Twenty years earlier, when Dirrul was still a schoolboy, the Galactic War had ended. Since that time relations between the Planetary Union and the Vininese Confederacy had steadily improved—at least in appearance. Undoubtedly there were commercial interests on both sides anxious to maintain peace and in recent years the quantity of goods in trade had grown enormously. But it was a truce, not a peace—a compromise, rather than a victory—forced on the galaxy when the scientists of the Planetary Union discovered the Nuclear Beams.

Pain shot through Dirrul's mind as he carried Glenna into the pressurized chamber under the control room. She and Hurd were still unconscious but Glenna turned in his arms and her eyes fluttered open. She looked at him and screamed in terrible agony before the pilot of the Space-dragon plunged a hypodermic sedative into her arm.

"It is better," he said to Dirrul in throaty Vininese. "So beautiful a one should not feel the pain." Carefully he fastened the needle-point of a wall tube into Glenna's vein and another into Hurd's.

"Synthetic blood feeding," he said with a smile. "It will keep them alive, perhaps even permitting minor wounds to heal, until I deliver them to the authorities on Vinin. You see, sir, my little ship is well-equipped." He slammed the round door of the hospital room shut and led Dirrul to the control blister.

"How long will it be, this trip to Vinin?" Dirrul asked, speaking very slowly in classical Vininese. Like everyone in the Movement he had studied the language of Vinin as a sort of courtesy and duty but he had no illusion about his small ability to handle it.

"In terms of your time," the pilot said, "about thirty days."

"Only thirty? The Planetary Union hasn't a ship that could make it under sixty!"

"But this is a Space-dragon." The words were self-explanatory.

Proudly the pilot showed Dirrul the controls, as functional and as uncomplex as the cool clean lines of the ship herself. The design was so logical, so basically simple, that within a few minutes Dirrul understood enough of the mechanism to have driven the ship himself.

"Your scientists could do as well," the pilot suggested, "If they wished."

"Not mine," Dirrul said.

"Pardon—the scientists of the Planetary Union. On Vinin we create for the future, for the progress of the Confederacy. We have no patience with petty argument, tedious experimentation or the pointless splitting of hairs that seems to occupy so much of your time here. For us a scientist is a producer,

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like everyone else. If he fails to do his job we replace him."

Pleased with the comparison the pilot chuckled over his dials as he turned on the power. Above the roar he said to Dirrul, "We must talk again one day, sir. If you ever have the good fortune to come to Vinin be sure to look me up."

II

As the Vininese ship shot smoothly out into the night sky, Dirrul's surface jet slashed back toward the Agronian capital. A synthetic tension, which he deliberately fed with nightmare improbabilities, kept him reasonably alert until he had safely returned the jet to its place in the compound. Then weariness engulfed him. Groggily he staggered to the pneumotube and within five minutes he was asleep in the small two-room worker's apartment where he lived.

The insistent *ping* of the door visiscope woke him. Dirrul glanced at his wall clock and saw that it was still early morning. He had slept less than three hours. Swearing angrily he turned down the visiarm. Dr. Kramer's serene aging white-bearded face was mirrored on the grey-tinted screen.

"Good morning, Edward," Kramer said with excessive cheerfulness. "For a moment I was afraid I had missed you. I've brought a transcription of the lecture you missed yesterday."

Dirrul swung out of bed and pushed the entry release. Soundlessly the thin metal door slid into the wall and the little professor bounced into the room. The door shot back into place.

"But you're not dressed!" the professor exclaimed without the slightest regret. "I always supposed you Air-Command men had to report for work at eight."

"Yesterday I was out on emergency call," Dirrul said dully. "For twelve hours, so I've the morning off. I had planned to pound the pillow until—"

"Good! We can talk, then. I don't have a class until ten and I always like to make the personal acquaintance of my students." Dr. Kramer made himself comfortable in Dirrul's Cloud-foam lounge, clasping his small, white hands over the little bulge of his belly. "Nice apartment you have here, Edward—excellent taste in furnishing."

"You don't mind if I shave and dress and have a bite of breakfast, Dr. Kramer?" Dirrul's sarcasm was quite lost on the professor.

"Do, by all means," Kramer said. "And you might order a pot of coffee for me."

Dirrul touched a button and the bed rolled up into the wall—another and the gleaming metal shower-room slid open. He stripped and bathed, setting the aquadial so that his body was pounded by a sharp rain of icy water. When he snapped it off the massage arms shot out, rubbing him dry with soft, plastic puffs. He sprayed the newly patented No-Beard Mist on his face and, after waiting the required three seconds, wiped it off with a dis-

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posable fiber towel. The skin was pink and clean, refreshingly invigorated. When he took a fresh uniform out of the wall-press and put it on he felt very much himself again, scarcely annoyed by his lack of sleep.

He pushed the button and the bathroom rolled out of sight. The whole process had taken less than five minutes.

At his panel-control Dirrul dialed a sizable breakfast for himself and coffee for the professor. Before he could draw up chairs the grey-topped table had rolled from its wall slot, the steaming food containers fixed to it.

"The marvels of invention!" Dr. Kramer said. "When I was young we had nothing like this. Many times, Edward, I had to prepare my own meals—and mighty skimpy ones they were too, some of them. A young teacher in those days wasn't paid very much."

"You survived, Dr. Kramer," Dirrul reminded him dryly. "A little work now and then wouldn't hurt us, either."

"That's the old argument, Edward. How we frothed and stewed over it when this new system was in its infancy! That was before your time, of course." Kramer poured a cup of coffee and after a thoughtful hesitation quietly took a slice of toast from Dirrul's platter. "They said we'd create a race of helpless children—defenseless lazy softies. They said if the individual wasn't forced to fight for his own survival, for the small comforts of life, he would die of boredom, drown initiative in luxury."

Dr. Kramer smiled—and took another slice of toast. "Like so many of the terrifying predictions of the Cassandras none of it came to pass. Today we're stronger and more vigorous than ever. Today we have more new inventions, more new discoveries, more fine philosophical insight than ever before in our entire history.

"Actually what we did was save time on the trivial routines so we could spend our work-potential where it mattered. After all, what was gained by a social system that forced me to spend so much of my energy feeding and housing and clothing myself? Weigh the loss against the greater contribution I might have made if I had spent the same time in research."

"Why, yes, Dr. Kramer—you could have given us the Cloud-foam lounge a generation earlier," Dirrul said bitterly, "or perhaps the Safe-sweet candy."

Again his sarcasm lost its savor, for the professor simply beamed and said, "Possibly, if that had been my field of interest. As it happens I'm a psychologist specializing in emotive linguistics—the symbologies for conveying meanings." The professor smiled.

"Our present vigor and strength, no doubt, is reflected in the sort of thing we do with all this extra time our gadgets give us—the scholarly research in the Arena or the Phono-view."

"You're being very uncritical, Ed-

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ward. Under any social form a great majority of the people would spend everything on personal pleasures. Why not? Each generation produces only a few leaders—we simply recognize that fact and adjust to it."

"But without the incentive of personal gain, Dr. Kramer . . ."

The professor laughed uproariously. "Incentive! You amaze me, Edward. I haven't heard the word used in just that context since I was a boy. You're a throwback—an anachronism. You sound like one of the elderly prophets of doom. I thought the breed had died out generations ago." The professor laughed again. "So our system creates no incentives. Tell me, Edward, why are you spending your Work-Equivs to take my night course?"

"Because, when I've passed enough university hours I can take the promotional test and become a full-fledged space-pilot."

"And still you say there's no incentive?"

"For myself, yes—but all of us ought to have the same kind of drive," said Dirrul.

"Such a condition never existed, Edward. Always there have been a few to make the inventions and the discoveries, a few to create the new dreams and frame the new ideas. Our people are no different. Incentive comes from within the individual—it cannot be imposed from the outside.

"The poorest sort of incentive, therefore, is economic need. Our system provides all our people with the basic necessities for everyday living. Some few of us are content with these and never want anything else. But the great majority work to earn Work-Equivs, which they can spend as they please—on amusement, luxury, education or the races at the Arena.

"Whatever the goal, it is a personal goal, set by each individual for himself. It's the only kind of incentive that makes any sense. Take yourself as an example—you spend your share of Work-Equivs on additional education because you want to become a space-pilot. By the time you've earned the promotion you'll have lifted yourself to a position of leadership.

"As you are well aware the space-pilot is the politician—statesman is a better word—of the Planetary Union. Through his ingenuity, his skill with languages, his psychological understanding of diverse racial groups, he holds our planets and peoples together, in one union with a common social philosophy. Think how frustrating it would be if you could never move toward your goal, Edward, because everything you earned had to be spent on trivialities—food, clothing, a place to live."

"All right," said Eddie doubtfully, "I have an apartment given to me but it has to be here in a worker's block. If our system provides for us all alike, as you imply, how is it you have accommodations in the Scientist's Center? Why should you be set apart? Or the poets and writers? Or the space-pilots, for that matter?"

"But there's no difference in the

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way we live, Edward. In general people who do similar work and have similar interests are happier if they share the same social environment. The average person, living in a worker's block, would feel terribly out of place in a scientist's center, just as I would develop terrific frustrations if I had to live with the mystics or the religious orders."

Dirrul deftly snatched the last piece of toast as the professor reached for it. "I'll dial some for you if you like," he offered.

"Oh, no, Edward! I'm dieting, you see, and I like to think—well, as I've told you so often in class, we all practise self-deception of a sort. Usually it's harmless—and almost always we symbolize it in words. For me the symbol is diet.

"I set up a specialized definition and convince myself that I am dieting if I never directly order fattening food. That gives me an escape hatch. If food is offered to me or if it happens to—ah—to fall into my hands, I can take it and still keep a clear conscience."

"Perhaps you practise more self-deception than you know, Dr. Kramer," said Eddie. "For instance, all your fine words about the strength and vitality of our new system—when I was a boy we licked the Vininese Confederacy. We couldn't do it today."

"That's a matter of opinion. We're at peace now and we'll remain so."

"Only because we have the Nuclear Beams. And look how we've botched that mess! Our scientists gave the process to the Vininese in order to patch together a peace when we could have destroyed their civilization completely."

"And our own too—with the weight of such a crime on our group conscience. There's one thing you still must learn, Edward—scientific progress is made by the sharing of ideas, not the concealment of them. We build the future upon the truths of the past and the present. If some of those truths are hidden away we create falsely on utterly false foundations."

Dr. Kramer pulled a manila envelope from his pocket and laid it on the table, pushing back his chair. "I must go, Edward; these are the notes on my lecture. As I told you before, I really came here for something else. I wanted to talk to you, to get to understand you better. I think I've learned a great deal."

The little professor was no longer smiling and the gentle touch of banter was gone from his voice. Dirrul felt a creeping fear rise within him. How much had he unconsciously revealed? How many of his own beliefs had Dr. Kramer been able to read between the lines?

Knowing them, would he guess Dirrul's connection with the Movement? The professor's bland naiveté could be the mask of a police informer. Dirrul shivered, remembering the sudden punishment that had overtaken Glenna and Hurd.

At the door Dr. Kramer paused and said, "I'm entertaining two or three of the university faculty this evening, Edward. They've read some of the papers you have written for

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my class. I'd like to have you meet them. My apartment—eight-thirty."

It was a command rather than an invitation. Dirrul accepted.

III

As soon as the professor had gone his fear vanished. What he had said to Dr. Kramer gave away no secrets and, in any case, he was crediting the professor with a perception he did not have. Ever since first joining the Movement, when he was still in school, Dirrul had taken such pains to conceal his motives that it would have required a good deal more than Dr. Kramer's clumsy prying to reveal them.

He had deliberately patterned his attitudes and habits upon a composite average, even to a mild and starry-eyed criticism of the system which was more or less expected from the ambitious young men of the Air-command.

Dr. Kramer's ecstatic praise of the system was the typical emotional reaction of the older generation. The professor may actually have been convinced of the truth of his own fuzzy propaganda. It was that sort of blind faith which still held the Planetary Union together.

Before returning to the Air-Command base at noon, Dirrul sought out Paul Sorgel and reported that Glenna and Hurd were safely on their way to Vinin. Apologetically, he mentioned Dr. Kramer's invitation, expecting to elicit Sorgel's scorn. Instead the Vininese agent was enthusiastic.

"Wonderful, Eddie!" he said. "Engineer it so they'll ask you back. We've never got one of our people in with the older science crowd before. Feel them out—we might pick up some converts. I won't need you at the next few meetings of the Movement—they'll be largely reorganizational, you know. I've been reading over Glenna's notes on the Plan. With one or two modifications we should be able to carry it out."

At eight-thirty that evening Dirrul was admitted to Dr. Kramer's apartment. He was neither overwhelmed by the professor's excessive courtesy nor impressed by the other guests. They were from the faculty of the Advanced Air University, elderly, respected and distinguished, names known for a generation everywhere in the Planetary Union.

To them, Edward Dirrul was merely a curiosity, a live specimen mounted for analysis. He had criticised their system. They intended to wring out the strands of his motivation, classify them, speculate and theorize upon them—and perhaps, ultimately, do the whole thing up as a monograph.

Dirrul knew why Kramer had selected him for study rather than any of the current crop of university students who held similar views. A product of the educational philosophy of the Planetary Union, Dirrul was thoroughly adjusted and decidedly aware of both his own abilities and shortcomings.

He was, first of all, gifted in the use of abstractions and generalities. In rare combination with this flair he had superior mechanical intel-

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ligence and a talent for expressive verbalization. He dealt easily in the subtle skills of logic. If he set his mind to it, he could erect absolute proofs of diametrically opposed truths and few minds could detect the delicately concealed flaws in the reasoning.

On the negative side of the scale was Dirrul's complete lack of psycho-biological intelligence, or a sense of scientific semantics. Neither to him seemed important. He missed them not at all and resented the legal requirements that forced him to take Dr. Kramer's course before he could qualify as a space-pilot.

The papers he had written for the professor were beautifully constructed patterns of logic, cast in well-turned phrases. They had clarified the criticism which others put inarticulately. It was the precision of his argument that disturbed Dr. Kramer and his faculty friends.

Dirrul was amused as the distinguished scientists skillfully manipulated the conversation to create counter-arguments opposing his. It was a game played in abstractions, a technique of which Dirrul was an instinctive master. Apparently the scientists found some sort of excitement in the game, since on succeeding evenings Dirrul was swamped with invitations from other faculty members—so many, in fact, that he had to neglect the serious work of the Movement. When he complained to Paul Sorgel, the Vininese agent was delighted.

"We can get along without you for awhile, Eddie," Sorgel said. "You're doing something much more important. You have a real in with the science crowd, and you've got them on the run because your arguments make sense. Every doubt you sow in their minds now will make our work just that much easier when the proper time comes."

Occasionally Dirrul had an uneasy feeling that he was making no real progress at all, that when he talked to the scientists he was a dancing puppet dangling on invisible strings. It seemed impossible that the scientists of the Ad-Air University could be so repeatedly defeated by his logic. Slowly, however, he reasoned his way to an explanation.

The scientists, like the system itself, were in the last wild frenzy of a decaying social order. They had lived so long in the atmosphere of relative truths, they had so carefully schooled themselves to avoid all absolutes, that they were unable to elude the simplest processes of logic. Their very efforts to be objective made them too honest to reject a conclusion once Dirrul had demonstrated the careful structure that seemed to support it.

A month passed. Dirrul felt divorced from the Movement, existing in suspended animation in a cloud of wordy unreality. Then abruptly the slow-moving dream ended. Late one night Paul Sorgel slipped into Dirrul's apartment and announced in an emotionless whisper, "The Plan's ready. You'll have to carry the details to Vinin. We can't use the teleray—the Union monitors

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might pick up the message and decode it."

"Naturally our Vininese Headquarters will want to know, Paul," said Eddie, "but can't that wait? We'll need every man here when we—"

Sorgel interrupted him. "I've made one or two changes in Glenna's original plan. It was too impractical. A handful of men can't take over half a galaxy."

"Glenna and Hurd weren't after the entire Planetary Union, Paul—that's out of the question. We meant to liberate Agron first. The capital is here and for awhile the government would be disrupted. When the people on the other planets saw how much better our social organization had become, modeled on the Vininese system, they would stage their own revolutions just like ourselves."

Sorgel laughed scornfully. "And in the meantime, of course, none of them would think of attacking you and throwing your people out?"

"Not if we seized the Nuclear Beam Transmitters," said Dirrul, "no space-fleet could come near us then."

"Eddie, you've lived in Agron too long. You're not thinking straight when you try to build the Plan around a single weapon."

"Why not, Paul? It's a perfect defense. In less than thirty seconds the Beam Transmitters can charge the entire stratospheric envelope of Agron. Nothing can move through it without disintegrating, yet life on the surface of the planet would go on quite normally because the atmosphere serves as an insulation."

"Technically it's a change in the form of energy, not a disintegration," Sorgel reminded him. "The beamed electrons unite with the atoms of visible material substances and alter them. I quite understand the process, Eddie—Vinin has the Beam too, you know."

"Because the Agronian scientists gave you the specifications!"

"That always has rankled, hasn't it?" said Sorgel.

"Yes," Dirrul admitted. "If the Vininese scientists had discovered the Beam-reaction first they would have conquered the galaxy."

"Conquer is a nasty word, Eddie," Sorgel said softly. "Vinin makes no conquests. Let's put it differently and say we would have used the Beam to bring peace to the galaxy instead of splitting it in two as it is now."

"Glenna's Plan can change all that, at least here on Agron."

"Face the facts, Eddie! A few conscientious people with ideals can't take over a planet. The Movement has its crews trained to capture the Beam Transmitters. You'll isolate Agron and seize the government offices simultaneously. What happens then?"

"Our people will rise and join us," said Eddie. "We'll create a new government modeled on Vinin's and we'll have young leaders instead of murky thinkers like Dr. Kramer."

"That's effective propaganda for speechmaking, but—"

"Glenna pounded away at it too,

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Paul," said Eddie. "It was the most telling line in winning our new crop of recruits."

"Which is precisely why the police disposed of her. But it won't work. The people won't rise. A mob is lethargic, too willing to keep things as they are. Here on Agron you've been coddled too long with luxuries and easy living. You have to prod the mob awake with a shock-force, a force coming from the outside."

"How, Paul? We haven't enough people in the Movement to put on any real show of strength. We can't even get outside."

"Now you understand the changes I've made in Glenna's Plan. You people in the Movement will seize the Beam Transmitters as originally planned. Then you'll simply hold them and keep them decommissioned long enough for a Vininese space-fleet to land. We'll set up your new government for you."

"And the rest of the Planetary Union will go to war!"

"It hardly matters," said Paul. "Once we're here the Beams will protect us against counterattack and every planet in the Vininese Confederacy has the same defense. One by one we can liberate the planets of the Union in the same way. But the timing is vital, of course—that's why you have to go to Vinin."

"I had a vacation leave only three months ago. I can't get tourist passage now without—"

"I've considered that. You'll have to have your own space-ship."

"Now wait a minute, Paul! It's one thing to borrow a surface jet but a space-cruiser . . . !"

"A cruiser, yes—not an old cargo ship. And you can handle that without a crew."

"It can't be done, Paul." Dirrul held his Glo-Wave nervously to the end of a cigarette. "Besides, I want to think this through carefully before I make up my mind."

"A merchant ship made a crash landing at Barney's emergency field yesterday," said Paul. "The damage was slight, but the pilot—unfortunately the pilot is dead." Sorgel smiled enigmatically. "Barney's one of our best men. He's been on the lookout for a chance like this for weeks.

"You'll leave tonight. Avoid the regular space lanes. I'm guessing you'll be on Vinin in a hundred days at the outside. On the fiftieth day after that—exactly one hundred and fifty days from now—our Vininese space-fleet must make a landing on Agron."

"I'll be missed, Paul—they'll make inquiries."

"And get no satisfactory answers."

Pacing the floor, Dirrul asked tensely, "Does everyone in the Movement know about this?"

"The vote was made unanimously yesterday."

"One of the others must have a vacation leave coming up. Send him. We're not at war with Vinin. He could take one of the regular space excursions."

"I can't send a message in writing. It would be picked up by the customs police. And you're the only

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one who can carry it verbally, Eddie. You know the whole background because you worked with Glenna and Hurd. You've been in the Movement longer than any of the others."

"Why not go yourself, Paul?"

"I can do more for the liberation if I stay here."

"I wish I'd been at the meeting yesterday when the vote was taken. I'd have liked to discuss it with the others before—"

"Why so many questions, Eddie? Why so many doubts all of a sudden?" Sorgel stood and faced Dirrul, holding his shoulders in a grip that hurt. "Are you trying to back out? Maybe it wasn't a good thing to let you play around with the science boys after all. Be honest with me, Eddie. If you're not sure where you stand, say so. There's no room in the Movement for traitors."

When Dirrul said nothing Sorgel added in a voice that rang with fervor, "You're the only man in the Movement who has had any training as a space-pilot. It depends on you now—everything you've ever dreamed of, everything Glenna and Hurd wanted. Can you forget what the Agronian police did to Glenna? Is your courage any less than hers?" Again Sorgel paused but still Dirrul said nothing. "The future of your world depends on you, Eddie—don't let it down."

"I'll go," Dirrul whispered.

As Eddie made up his mind his internal tension relaxed and he was filled with a sense of well-being. When he thought about it he couldn't understand why he had hesitated—unless perhaps what Sorgel suggested was true—that his contact with the Ad-Air faculty had blunted and nearly perverted his established sense of values.

An hour later Dirrul boarded the battered antiquated space cargo carrier on the launching rack at Barney's emergency field. At the last minute Sorgel pressed a curious disk into his hand. Made of a very light metal and suspended from a short chain it was two inches in diameter and covered with a complex grid design.

"Put it around your neck before you land, Eddie. Don't remove under any circumstances until you report. Give it to the Chief then. He'll know I sent you because it's my own identification activator." Sorgel clasped Dirrul's hand warmly. "When you land on Vinin take the North Field below the capital. It's the HQ operational center. Use Wave-code three-seven-three and they'll know you're friendly."

## IV

After the launching space-flight was normally a monotonous routine. The course was charted by automatic navigators and the vast pattern of interlocking machinery and safety devices was electronically controlled by robot relays from the pilot master-panel. The chief function of a trained space-pilot, aside from his services as a diplomat, was to handle emergency situations for which automatic responses could not be built into the machinery.

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Dirrul, however, could not depend a great deal upon the robot devices. He had to avoid the well-traveled and well-charted commercial space-lanes. He had to be constantly on the alert for the telltale white of a police cruiser. A cargo carrier was the slowest ship in the universe—Dirrul could outrun nothing, not even a playboy's sport jalopy, and inspection by the customs police would have been disastrous.

He followed a roundabout route, keeping as far from inhabited planets as he could, and he made good time. In ninety-five days he had reached the mythical border in space, which divided the territory of the Planetary Union and the Vininese Confederacy.

He was almost at midpoint in the galaxy. On the glazed screen of his space-map the mirrored pinpricks of sun systems glittered like microscopic gems scattered over the curve of a gigantic black saucer. Dirrul had never been so far from Agron. He felt a stifling sense of insignificance.

The meaning of time as he understood it was somehow overwhelmed by the immensity of space. Now and yesterday, today and tomorrow, became a single unity. Dirrul had a new sense of the past in terms of the present. His mind groped for word symbols that he understood which could crystalize the shadowy new concept filling his mind.

New understanding seemed to arise from the space-map. Somewhere among the glowing points of light was the Place of the Beginning, a single planet called Earth. In the far-distant past Earthmen had made themselves rational beings. But for centuries thereafter they had made no further progress, apparently appalled by the audacity of such presumptive evolution. They had fought through a long primitive period of violence, erecting system on system and philosophy upon philosophy to conceal, destroy and wipe out their own biological machinery.

Then out of a final orgy of death and terror the Earthmen had grasped the meaning and the responsibility of the Rational Potential. They had understood the reality of being.

Within a century after that they had conquered space. They had found peoples like themselves occasionally—but more often races that had followed different biological adaptations to different environments. Wherever there seemed to be a spark of primitive rationality the Earthmen had stayed and patiently taught the Rational Potential of being, which they had learned for themselves only after such bloodshed.

The galaxy was theirs, in a sense, for it thought in the patterns of Earthmen, although long ago their direct influence had waned. They were a legend and an ideal, lost in the vastness of space, yet bound fast into the cultures of all peoples.

Yet somewhere the Earthmen must have failed, somewhere there must have been a flaw in their teaching. Fifty years earlier, as the Agronians measured time, the galaxy had been torn apart by war.

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The Agronians had led one group of planets, the Vininese another. Planet after planet was seared by deadly new weapons—world after world died in the orange flame of gaudy atomic disintegration. Slowly the power of Vinin crept across the sky until the Vininese ruled half the galaxy.

Their first defeat had come unexpectedly. Their great space-armada swung in on Agron, while the people crowded in terror in their flimsy raid shelters. But the Vininese ships had vanished high in the air. Not even debris had fallen on the planet.

It was the first use of the Nuclear Beams. Dirrul had been a schoolboy when the Agronian scientists announced their discovery. He remembered the exciting thrill of pride, recalled how he and his schoolmates had dreamed of destroying the Vininese with the new weapon.

He remembered too the galling bitterness he had felt when the scientists announced that they had made peace instead.

They had had sound reasons, of course. They said the Beams had a limited value. They could be used only defensively to girdle a single planet in the stratospheric level of its atmosphere. Elsewhere they were harmless. To compound the spectacular timidity, the scientists had given away the secret to all comers, incuding the Vininese. They had an argument for that particular idiocy too—if each planet could protect itself so easily from all external attack its people could freely decide for themselves their galactic allegiance or maintain isolated independence.

The Planetary Union had been formed and members of the Vininese Confederacy invited to join it. Not a people anywhere in the Confederacy made even tentative exploration of the offer while five sun systems of the Union later joined the Vininese. That was the fact that had ultimately prodded Dirrul into joining the Movement.

Later, when he read the pamphlets brought from Vinin, he had clarified his purposes. On the one hand lay the waste, the confusion, the uncertainty of Agron. Scientists who talked forever of hypotheses and were afraid to stand firm for any absolute truths—moralists who qualified even the simplest standards of right and wrong—philosophers who glorified a condition of eternal chaos which they called an open mind.

On the other hand lay the clean efficiency of Vinin. Scientific certainty, and the progress that stemmed from it—the Space-dragon instead of the Safe-sweet candy, a clear social organization in which the individual was directed by established and inflexible principles.

The whole of it was history as Dirrul had learned it, the chronology of the past. As he looked on the star map of the galaxy, at midpoint between the two great unions of planets, the meaning of the past began to change. The chronology fell into a new perspective.

Against the vast expanse of space time twisted into a new relationship.

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Time and space began to equate with an exciting synonymity. History was not the past, dead and numbered—history was now. All things, all space, all time, were forever fixed at the instant of now.

In Dirrul's mind a tumult of facts trembled on the verge of a startling new order—the atomic structure of all energy and the black saucer of the galaxy. The violent spasms the Earthmen had suffered before they found the Rational Potential and the devastation of the Galactic War.

But before he could assess such new values and verbalize the new generalization the antiquated warning system of his ship twanged tinnily. On the control panel screen he saw the trim outline of a white Agronian police ship. A moment later the voice came over the speaker, ordering him to state his permit registry and his destination.

Dragged so suddenly back to reality, Dirrul reacted in panic. It was a routine inquiry. He might have bluffed his way clear. Instead he put the cargo ship at top speed toward Vinin and watched helplessly while the patrol cruiser closed relentlessly in.

"Stand for search!" the voice commanded.

When he did nothing the police shot a warning rocket over his bow. A second shot struck the rear of the cargo ship and tore away a section of landing gear. Swearing, Dirrul tried to maneuver out of range, and to a certain extent he was successful. But piloting skill could not make up for the cumbersome bulk of his unarmed ship. Two more blasts hit him, collapsing the forward compartment and knocking out one power tube.

At the point of triumph, however, the police patrol turned away and left Dirrul limping alone in space. For a moment he was puzzled. In another ten minutes they could have boarded the cargo carrier and made him prisoner. But he understood when he glanced again at the star map—the Agronian police had pursued him far into Vininese territory. If Vininese patrols had found them there it might have created an unpleasant intergalactic incident.

Dirrul made a quick survey of the damage. He had only one power tube intact—beyond that, the cargo carrier was wrecked and he had on board nothing with which to make repairs. He could move ahead only at quarter-speed.

Sorgel had put a time limit of one hundred days on the trip to Vinin. Headquarters had to know by then of the Plan on Agron. Dirrul had five days left and as the hours ran out he was still grinding slowly toward the outer atmosphere of Vinin. Quite aware that proper security demanded the message be delivered in person, Dirrul nonetheless faced the alternative of losing everything if he waited.

Logically weighing all factors, he concluded he would not be risking too much, considering the stakes, if he used the teleray. Agron monitors could pick it up, of course, and no doubt the outpost stations were instructed to record all mes-

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sages emanating from within the territory of Vinin. But Dirrul knew the Air-Command.

They wallowed in the same luxury and comfort enjoyed by the rest of the Planetary Union. Outposts personnel, so far from the capital, would be even less likely to take their duties seriously than Dirrul's own unit.

He tried to make the information enigmatic to the curious and at least suggestive to the Vininese. He used the landing Wave-code 373. The small red light on the control panel glowed and he knew he had established contact. In carefully chosen Vininese he spoke into the teleray mouthpiece.

"Sorgel requires help for Glenna-Hurd Plan. Exactly fifty days, their time."

He repeated the message. As an afterthought he gave his own position and asked for emergency repair assistance. The whole meaning hinged upon the names of Glenna and Hurd. However, since they had been taken to Vinin, they should already have outlined the Plan to the Vininese command. If there were any doubts Headquarters could teleray for clarification. When his speaker remained silent Dirrul assumed he had been understood.

He began to feel the pull of Vininese gravity, found himself in trouble with his ship. He tried to keep the disabled cargo carrier relatively stationary, so that the Vininese repair ships could locate him. With only one power tube, however, maneuver was impossible. The battered ship plunged out of control toward the planet.

For an hour Dirrul fought with all the skill he knew. A thousand feet above the surface he managed to force the ship to level off temporarily. He had no time to seek a proper landing area and in any case his gear had been shot away.

There was a wide flat plain directly below him, in the distance the towering mass of a large city silhouetted against a range of mountains. Dirrul headed his ship for the open fields, setting the safety devices for a crash landing.

He hung around his neck the identification disk Sorgel had given him, tucking it beneath his tunic. If he were hurt in the landing, a Vininese might find him, and the disk would indicate that he was important enough to be taken to the Headquarters Command. If his teleray hadn't been understood there might still be a chance for him to make his report in person.

The ship crashed against the hard ground. Dirrul felt a wrenching pain as the automatic safety arms pinioned him fast to cushion the fall, before hurling him free of the blazing control room. After that he lost consciousness.

## V

When Dirrul opened his eyes it was after dark but the triple moons of Vinin were full and the landscape glowed with a yellowish light. He had fallen into a ditch which ran beside a narrow, green-paved road. In the distance, hidden in a

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dense copse of blue tree-like vegetation, he saw the fragments of his wrecked ship. The purple grass of Vinin spread richly all around him, damp and warm. At the bottom of the ditch a reddish trickle of liquid washed over his feet.

His throat ached with thirst. His tongue clung like sand to the roof of his mouth. He knew that an Agronian could live in the Vininese atmosphere but he was uncertain whether his body could assimilate the native liquids. Yet to ease the torture he dipped his hand into the red fluid and rubbed a few drops over his lips. The sting of salt increased his torment.

His body shuddered with pain as he pulled himself to his feet. He crept a few feet along the green highway, and slowly his will mastered his strength so that he could walk erect. He began to orient himself a little. On the horizon he saw the skyline of the city he had observed from the air and he knew he was following the road in the right direction.

But the distance was greater than he had estimated. He walked for an hour and the city still seemed no closer. Nor had he seen any sign of habitation where he might go for help, nothing except the towering endless yellow stone wall which he had been following for more than half an hour. There was neither gate nor break in the stone. Atop the wall regularly spaced brackets held three naked wires in place.

The wall probably guarded the estate of a Vininese official, he decided. In that case the wires were either a warning device or a charged trap against thieves. Durril was puzzled by the obvious deduction. Such things were necessary on Agron to protect important installations like the Beam Transmitters—but he had hardly expected there would be a need for them on Vinin. Yet when he considered it objectively, why not? Every system of society, no matter how ideal, would produce inevitable malcontents—there were fools among the Vininese, as there were among other peoples.

Dirrul saw a towering gate in the wall and ran ahead eagerly, only to fall in disappointment against the thick metal grille. The gate was locked by a concealed device he could not locate. At a considerable distance inside the wall was a second, higher than the first. Dirrul saw a faint light at the inner gate and assumed there was a guard of some sort stationed there. He tried with all his strength to cry out for help but his throat was dust-dry. He could utter only a faint whisper.

When he tried to go on he was overcome with exhaustion. He staggered a few feet beyond the gate and collapsed into the ditch. He lay face down in the warm purple grass, his swollen tongue hanging limply from his mouth. Imperceptibly the thirst began to diminish. After a moment's speculation Dirrul understood why and crushed a handful of the purple grass against his lips. It was warm and sweet—a comforting liquid began to flow down his throat. He plunged his head luxuriously into a

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thick mass of the weed, breathing deeply the sweet odor of the crushed blades.

A silent grey vehicle darted along the green road and jerked to a stop in front of the gate. It came so quickly Dirrul had no time to call out. The Vininese driver stood up and bawled orders at the inner gate. A faint voice replied. The driver shouted again. The gate swung open and the vehicle moved inside.

Bewildered, Dirrul sat up, his head reeling. He understood a little Vininese, not enough to translate exactly what had been said but enough to make out a tantalizing half-meaning. The driver was searching all the work camps, he had said, for the Agronian girl, Glenna. He wanted to check something or other to see if she were here.

Work camp? Dirrul decided he must have got the word wrong. Glenna and Hurd might still be in hospitals but if they had recovered they would be honored citizens of Vinin. Still—what sort of hospital would have both double walls and alarm wires?

Only an asylum for hopeless mental cases! The realization made Dirrul cold with a terrible fear. Glenna—hopelessly insane!

To save the Movement it was vital for Dirrul to make his report immediately. What help could the Vininese get from a madwoman? He sprang up and ran dizzily to the gate. Before he could shout for the guard shadowy figures rose up around him, silently closing great hairy hands over his mouth and dragging him back across the road.

Tied and gagged Dirrul watched while the black-robed creatures worked stealthily at the central bars of the gate with tiny blue-flaming torches. Beneath their flowing capes they were beings like himself, which indicated that they were either Agronian or Vininese, for by the perverse chance of biological adaptation the people of the two planets were so structurally similar that even intermarriage was possible. One by one they cut out the bars until the span in the gate was wide enough for them to work their way through.

For a moment the band stood in the road, apparently talking. At least their lips moved and their hands fluttered expressively but Dirrul heard no sound. Reaching a decision they went through the gate in single file, carrying long vicious weapons with them. Two of the black-caped men came and stood guard on either side of Dirrul.

Whatever these vandals were doing they were working in stealth and fear and Dirrul realized their aim must be illegal. He fought to break free of his bonds so that he might warn the loyal Vininese garrison. The two guards shoved him back roughly. One of them grabbed Dirrul's tunic in a claw grip and the cloth tore open, revealing Sorgel's identification disk.

Both guards bent over him, fingering the disk, talking soundlessly with their facile fingers. Suddenly they jerked the disk off, snapping the chain. At the same moment a

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rolling explosion from within the wall shook the earth.

Dirrul heard a great noise and a terrifying fear filled his mind. It was a steady undiminishing fear that gripped every muscle of his body. His throat was ice-cold. His heart pounded and gasped for breath. Every nerve-end in his body quivered and his imagination was swamped with a flood of shattering ephemeral horrors.

Nothing could shake off the terror. Dirrul's skill with reason and logic failed him. It was impossible to organize his thinking to combat the sensory shock waves disrupting his thoughts. Logical patterns made no sense. The very process of trying to build meaning into them—the process of thinking itself—left him weak and trembling.

The guards watched his terror for a moment, watched while he clung close to the ground, trying to dig his fingers into it. Then one of them laughed—a piercing discordant shriek, shrilling louder than the din behind the wall. The second man, snarling viciously, kicked Dirrul in the ribs.

For Dirrul the blaze of pain was almost a relief. As his body responded to it on a level of instinct, the chattering terror in his mind diminished. A second blow on the head sent him reeling close to the brink of unconsciousness. His perceptive reactions went slightly out of focus.

In a wavering mist he saw the black figures emerge from the gate, dragging a dozen or more captives with them. A second explosion rocked the earth and flames leaped high behind the yellow wall. In the glare Dirrul recognized Glenna, struggling frantically in the arms of her masked captor.

Dirrul's memory after that was a vague patchwork of unrelated episodes. He saw huge saddled reptilian bipeds dragged out of the concealing brush. The captives were bound in the saddles and the black-robed figures mounted behind them. Later two of the men pulled Dirrul up and tied him across a saddle too.

At a sickening gallop the caravan moved away from the green highway, striking out over the purple plain. For awhile Dirrul lost rational control of sensation. He felt but without understanding. His brain pulsed in a continuous terror that seemed to resolve itself into sound —a continuous high-pitched scream coming from within his own mind. His body throbbed with pain and nausea wrenched emptily at the muscles of his stomach. But he could not sort out the feelings, classify them or adjust to them.

At the edge of the plain the caravan turned up a steep rocky trail which led into the ragged range of mountains banked behind the Vininese city. They came to a stop in a stony ravine, concealed beneath a tangle of gigantic purple-leafed vines.

Dirrul's captors dismounted and removed their black cloaks, hiding them among the rocks. Underneath they wore the warm gray skintight workers' clothing of Vinin. The

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majority left their animals tethered to the roots of the vine and began the steep descent on foot to the city. Only three remained behind to guard the prisoners.

They built a small fire and prepared food, serving the hot sweet chunks of white meat in large wicker baskets. As soon as Dirrul discovered that he could stomach the food he wolfed his share hungrily. The guards brought him more. He felt better. Except for the sing-song ringing in his head he might have been able to think clearly enough to evaluate his own position.

But that could be done later. He was overcome by an immense drowsiness. He relaxed and slept.

## VI

A shrill scream woke him with a start of horror. His captors had taken him from his saddle and propped him against a mound of rocks, along with the other prisoners. His muscles were numb and dead, so limp it was almost impossible for him to turn his head. Faintly the whirring terror whispered in his mind.

Dirrul's eyes focused slowly on the clearing. One of the prisoners had been carried there, close to the fire. It was Glenna. Two of her captors held her while the third bent over her head, probing her ear with a sharp instrument. His arm moved. Glenna screamed and fainted. For a moment Dirrul saw the side of her face smeared with a spreading stain of blood. Then nausea swept over him. When he opened his eyes again the three men were working over another prisoner at the fire.

Vaguely Dirrul knew he had to escape. He forgot the Movement—he thought of nothing any loftier than his own personal survival. The idea was elemental, built upon the simplest sort of observation and hypothesis.

Yet it came slowly and painfully, as if he had just tried to understand after one reading the Cranmor-Frasher Theory of Diminishing Corelatives. As he verbalized the conclusion two things happened—the drug-like languor in his muscles began to disperse and the shrilling note of terror burst up loud in his mind once more.

Two of the men brought their last victim back from the fire and laid his body on the stones close to Dirrul. Dirrul feigned sleep when they stood over him. One of them prodded him with the tip of a dusty boot—then they both laughed.

They went back to the fire and talked soundlessly to their companions, holding up the identification disk which had been ripped from Dirrul's neck hours before. That amused them briefly, until one of the three snatched the disk and hurled it toward the mouth of the ravine in violent anger.

The three men pulled thick white skins together near the fire and crept into them. Dirrul waited until he was sure they slept. It was the only chance he would have to escape, but when he tried to creep away his hands collapsed from sheer terror. The crying fear in his mind was so

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loud his head seemed to vibrate physically with the sound.

Thought was impossible. Judgment and decision were impossible. If he tried to consider even a problem as simple as the safest means of passing the dying fire—reason failed him. He could weigh nothing critically—he could not consider probable courses of rational action.

Nonetheless he inched forward. It took all the courage and stamina he possessed. Gradually a strange and foggy understanding formed in his brain. The terror seemed to die if he planned nothing, merely responding without thought to the instinctive urge to escape. Let instinct do the trick then.

Detached from the control panel of his cerebral cortex his body mechanism functioned perfectly. It was like a space-ship smoothly piloted by its automatic navigators. Dirrul gave himself over to his own built-in stimulus-response relays and the screeching fear shriveled and died.

Calm and unhurried he walked past the fire and the sleeping men. As calmly he searched the mouth of the ravine for Sorgel's disk. When he found it he stuffed it into the pocket of his tunic and strode confidently along the trail that led down from the hills.

It was dawn. In the pink morning light he could see the Vininese city at his feet, neat, clean, well-blocked streets and towering buildings of black stone. On the outskirts were the circular space-fields and the long low flat-roofed interplanetary freight depots. Farther away, dotting the countryside at regular intervals, were curious block-shaped windowless structures surrounded by double walls.

Dirrul had never seen anything like them before but, through a process of judicial elimination, he decided they must be the Vininese Beam Transmitters. The defense of Vinin was remarkably thorough, far surpassing anything of a similar nature on Agron.

It came to him with something of a shock that he was thinking rationally once more. His mind was completely clear. He felt ashamed of the foolish, groundless terror that had unnerved him in the ravine. He tried to understand what had happened to him but it was beyond analysis. In retrospect he realized that the danger had been less than what he faced on any normal day in the Air-Command emergency maintenance service.

The only logical explanation was the food they had given him. It must have been heavily drugged with a new poison known to the Vininese. Dirrul was tempted to go back and rescue Glenna, if she were still alive after the torture to which she had been subjected. But he knew it was more important for him to contact Vininese Headquarters first. He had a message to deliver. Glenna herself would have wanted that.

In two hours Dirrul was on the plain again. All the suffering of the past few hours was gone. The plentiful purple grass had quenched his

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thirst and surprisingly eased his hunger as well. He felt keenly alert and alive. The sun was warm, the air was balmy. He was on Vinin.

Spiritually he had come home, to the thing he believed in. Not many men had such opportunity to realize their dreams of perfection. To cap the triumph Dirrul knew it might still be possible to make his report and save the Movement on Agron.

From the top of a purple-swathed knoll he looked down across a twisting red stream toward the suburbs of the city. Magnificent black-stone villas, surrounded by stylized gardens, were on both sides of the green highway.

Further on, close to the city, were the crowded workers' quarters, behind them, hidden in a faint mist, the rectangular masses of public buildings reaching up toward the stars. This was as Paul Sorgel had so often described it. Such grandeur could only belong to the capital city of the Vininese Confederacy.

Under the brow of the knoll Dirrul saw one of the stone block-buildings within its protective double walls. A huge trumpet-like transmitter was exposed at the top of the structure. In some ways it resembled the Beam Transmitters on Agron but the differences were so striking Dirrul knew it was a totally new device—possibly a more efficient variation invented by the Vininese. The faint hum of machinery and the regular movement of the sending tube indicated that the machine was running—but for what purpose Dirrul could only guess.

The yard between the two walls was patrolled by a smartly disciplined score of Vininese. Dirrul considered going to them to ask for transportation to the city but changed his mind. It was very possible that the installation was secret. The guards might have had instructions to dispose immediately of any intruder. On the whole it seemed wiser to go a little farther to one of the walled villas.

Dirrul walked half a thousand feet along the green highway and turned up the drive leading toward one of the sprawling mansions. As he passed the portals of the open gate an alarm bell clanged—seconds later five Vininese infantry surrounded him, prodding him into the house with their gleaming weapons. In precise Vininese, carefully enunciated, Dirrul tried to explain what he wanted—but the guards made no reply, merely staring at him with cold glazed eyes, comprehending nothing.

They threw him roughly into a dark room, where a slim Vininese waited in a lounge chair. As Dirrul's eyes grew accustomed to the faint light he saw that the Vininese held a snub-nosed rocket-pistol.

"Your permit?" the Vininese asked languidly.

"Yesterday I came here from—"

"Then you have no permit. I must shoot you, of course."

"Sir, I have a message from Agron! You must take me to Headquarters!"

"Oh, you're a tourist. But this is a prohibited area. From the dust on

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your tunic, I take it you have done a great deal of walking. A pity, my friend—naturally you've seen the transmitters."

"We have them on Agron but it is of no importance."

The Vininese threw back his head and laughed, "Oh, no—of no importance—you have seen nothing!"

"I do not understand you," Dirrul said desperately. "My Vininese is very poor. But you must help me. I bring news of the Movement on Agron and time is short." Anxiously Dirrul plunged into his story, tripping repeatedly over the involved syntax of Vinin to his host's obvious amusement.

Eventually, however, he made his point, for the tall Vininese said, "Then you must be the agent who sent the teleray report. We've been looking for you, sir. We feared, after you crashed, that you might have been taken by the vagabonds." Still holding Dirrul centered in the gunsight the Vininese picked up a portable teleray and asked for Headquarters.

While he waited he added, "You must forgive this reception, my friend from Agron. We have been having so much trouble with the vagabonds lately we must all go armed. Here in the transmission area we must be particularly alert."

His tone was warm but the gun never wavered. When he made his connection he spoke rapidly into the mouthpiece, too rapidly for Dirrul to work out an accurate translation. It seemed, however, that the conversation was centered around the transmitters rather than the report Dirrul had to make. The Vininese finished the dialogue and smiled engagingly at Dirrul.

"I am to take you to the capital, my friend," he said. "They are preparing a reception for you. You are a hero of Vinin, to have braved so much for the cause."

The Vininese came forward suddenly and pulled aside the torn cloth at the throat of Dirrul's tunic.

"But you—you must have a disk!" The Vininese was suddenly frightened. "There is no tourist stamp on your arm. I don't understand."

"Paul Sorgel loaned me his when I left Agron." Dirrul felt in his tunic pocket. "He said I was to give it to the Chief when I made my report but if you must see it now—"

"No, no—by all means, keep it." The tall man's voice was pleasant again. "I was simply afraid that someone might have come who—but it is nothing. I am weary from all this vigilance against the vagabonds. It is hard to think realistically."

"I was surprised to see so much lawlessness on Vinin."

"Then you're very naive, my friend. There's an element like that among all people, although I must admit ours here have suddenly become excessively active. Their attacks are so systematic and so well-organized! Hardly a night passes without trouble at a work camp or a transmitter station.

"Your transmitters are different from ours. Have you developed an improvement in technique?"

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"They are curious, aren't they? You must ask the Chief to tell you all about them." The Vininese chuckled with delight. "I wouldn't want to spoil his surprise by letting you in on the secret first."

## VII

The Vininese drove Dirrul to the city in a heavily armed surface car. Two of the infantrymen sat behind them, their rocket guns ready on their knees. It was testimony to the efficiency and organization of Vinin that such a finished reception could be prepared on such short notice. Dirrul's first intimation of the scope of the ceremony came when they stopped at a school to be cheered by the pupils.

Rank upon rank of boys and girls lined up smartly behind the high wire fence. They ranged in ages from tots, barely able to stand, to young people in late adolescence. Except for the round metal disks, which all of them wore, they were completely naked.

"Clothing breeds such false modesty and so many foolish frustrations," Dirrul's host explained. "On Vinin every child is reared in completely objective equality. As soon as we take them from their parents—about the time when they're first learning to walk—we give them identification disks. Before that, when they're in the instinct period, the disks aren't necessary.

"After their basic education we classify them. The leader-class is issued permanent disks and the others give theirs up. The adjustment is something very severe but on the whole the casualties are light." Suddenly the Vininese seized Dirrul's hand and looked into his eyes. "I trust you follow me, my friend?"

"Yes," Dirrul answered. Reason led him to a conclusion as he looked at the massed children, a conclusion he could not bring himself to face. He felt a new kind of fear, as cold as the depths of space and as devoid of emotion. Instead of trusting to his own logic Dirrul struggled to find a flaw in it—for a man cannot easily watch his dream turn to dust in his hands.

They drove on into the city. Rows of men and women in working clothes lined the streets, cheering wildly in unison. Crossed Vininese flags were draped between the buildings and brave-colored streamers danced in the wind.

"A reception is good for them," the Vininese said. "We need heroes occasionally. It's fortunate you came when you did. The vagabonds have had a disturbing effect on morale and it's impossible to suppress the news entirely."

The vehicle stopped before the towering government building. Dirrul was led up a flight of stone steps to a wide porch overlooking the mass of cheering upturned faces in the public square. He stood motionless while speeches were made and gay ribbon was draped around his neck. The air shook with bright explosions—a huge flag was unfurled over the porch—band music began to blare and a tidal wave of pre-

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cision-trained Vininese infantry wheeled into the square.

An official touched Dirrul's arm. "You must take the salute of our work-leaders now."

Dirrul was pushed back against the stone railing as an orderly mob filed past, blank-faced and chattering with meaningless pleasure. Many of them pressed forward to touch his hand before the guards tactfully hurried them on. When the organized confusion was at its height a tiny square of paper was slipped into his hand.

Dirrul had no idea which of the mob had given it to him and he dared not glance at it. But he managed to hide the paper in the band of his tunic.

Hour by hour the throng filed past, endless and meaningless. It was an agony for Dirrul. For the first time he looked into the face of his dream and saw the reality of Vinin—order, discipline, efficiency —and utter blankness. Unhappily he recalled one of Dr. Kramer's lectures.

". . . Defiance of convention, confusion, frustration, stubbornness—yes and a touch of the neurotic too —these goad the individual into solving problems. And problem solving is progress. An orderly society that asks no questions of itself, a society that has no doubts, is a dying society . . ."

Dirrul understood the professor at last. He looked squarely at the fact of what he was, a traitor to his own people, on the verge of betraying them. He had been wonderfully deluded by his own self-deception.

But the job wasn't quite finished. The Vininese would not have gone to take Glenna from the hospital if they had understood his teleray. Let them splurge on their reception! He was unimpressed. When the time came for questions to be answered he would conveniently forget why he had been sent to Vinin. Nothing they could do would drag it out of him.

The crowd thinned and Dirrul was taken inside the building, where his Vininese host awaited him. Sighing deeply the Vininese stood up. "These public displays do take so much of our time," he said, "but it's over now." This last seemed to amuse him and he repeated it softly before adding, "The Chief's ready to see you."

Remembering the note and the flimsy possibility that it might suggest a way out, Dirrul answered quickly, "But, sir, I really ought to clean up first."

"You Agronians have such weird notions of propriety!"

"I would feel more presentable to your Chief if—if I could have a bath. Perhaps I might even borrow a change of clothing."

The Vininese fingered his chin thoughtfully. "It might be more amusing. Yes, the Chief can wait a few minutes longer for you to satisfy your vanity."

He summoned a blank-faced liveried servant and asked for a clean worker's suit for Dirrul. Then he took Dirrul to the wall tube and they shot noiselessly to an upper floor. As he left Dirrul at the door

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of a luxurious suite, the Vininese said, "When you change your clothes, my friend, don't forget to take the disk out of your tunic. The Chief will want it when you see him."

When he was sure he was alone Dirrul spread open the note. It was a crude drawing of a hearing aid and beneath it a cryptic sentence written in Agronian,

*I lost mine and so has Glenna now.*

The signature was unmistakably Hurd's but the note made no sense. Hurd's hearing was as sound as Dirrul's. He had never used a mechanical device—how could he have lost it then? *So has Glenna*—that must be the key. Hurd somehow knew about the vagabond raiding party that had rescued Glenna from the mental hospital. He must have escaped from the Vininese earlier himself. He was probably hiding somewhere in the capital.

Working on this hypothesis Dirrul made a guess that the thing Hurd had lost was his illusion about the Vininese system. The hearing aid symbolized what Hurd had been told about it, as opposed to the reality which he saw with his own eyes.

But such an interpretation didn't ring entirely true. It was too involved for an idea which could have been better expressed in four words—*I know the truth.* Tossing the note aside Dirrul turned on the water in the shower room and thoughtfully disrobed.

As he threw his tunic aside a violent paralyzing terror seized his mind, making his head sing with a screeching vibration. Blindly he snatched up the tunic in order to stuff the cloth into his mouth so he would not cry out. But as soon as he pressed it against his skin his terror vanished, like a siren suddenly stilled.

The pattern of the real truth fell into place then. Now he understood the power of Vinin. Experimentally he took Sorgel's disk out of his tunic and laid it on a table. As soon as he did so the blinding nameless horror flamed up. When he held the disk again the exhausting emotion vanished.

Looking back Dirrul saw an abundance of evidence that might have given him a clue, had he not spent so much mental effort bolstering his illusion of Vinin. There was the circumstance of his own unrelenting terror when he was without the disk in the ravine—the painful sight of his captors puncturing the prisoners' eardrums—the soundless talk of the vagabonds, like the lip-reading of the deaf—the bleak orderliness of the cheering mobs—and, most obvious of all, the strange transmitters atop the well-guarded stone block-buildings.

It was all there, even to the final cruelty to the children. What was it the Vininese had said? "The adjustment is sometimes very severe but on the whole the casualties are light." And the very young, before they were taken from their parents, didn't need disks because they were in what the Vininese had called "the instinct period."

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Dirrul knew what Hurd's drawing meant. Somehow Hurd had lost his hearing, perhaps as a result of the beating the police had given him on Agron. In any case only the deaf could think rationally on Vinin. Hurd was telling Dirrul to shatter his own sense of hearing if he still had the will to think and act for himself. The nightmare Dirrul had witnessed in the ravine was not torture but the bravery of desperate men attempting to rescue rational minds.

The Rational Potential—the gift of the legendary Earthmen! Like the processes of thought itself it could never be wiped out by argument or reason once it was understood. The Earthmen had wasted centuries trying to undo their own evolved rationality before they realized it could not be done. Now, on a higher level in another plane, the Vininese were struggling to submerge the Earthmen's second achievement of the Rational Potential.

It was done by their transmitters. A wave of some sort—probably subsonic or supersonic—continuously filled the Vininese atmosphere. The Vininese who wore the disks were protected against it. The others succumbed if they retained their hearing. As Dirrul himself had discovered in the ravine, when he did not consciously think the terror diminished.

All Vininese children were given a basic education. It built up their automatic responses, established correct stimulus-response behavior patterns. Then, for the masses, the protective disks were eliminated and the screeching fear pounded at them until the processes of creative thinking were destroyed, leaving a backlog of malleable and obedient habit patterns. The problem solving was done for them by their masters.

The Vininese Confederacy—half the galaxy—was peopled by billions upon billions of robot races, ruled by a handful of men with absolute power. To that Dirrul would have betrayed his planet! To slavery and to the destruction of the Rational Potential, all for the slippery dream of orderliness and efficiency which masqueraded as progress.

He could save Agron today—but for how long? Sorgel would bewitch countless other discontented Agronian fools. The Movement would try again and one day the Vininese space fleet would penetrate the Agronian Nuclear Beams. Dirrul had to escape. He had to go home and tell the truth about Vinin.

And it was impossible. He was completely trapped with no visible way out for himself.

## VIII

Dirrul stood in front of the metal-surfaced reflector, fingering the cap of his ear. To survive as a thinking being he must deafen himself. Yet he hesitated. Self-inflicted violence was the negation of the Rational Potential.

Then, slowly, he developed a new idea. He could use the power of Vinin to save Agron if not himself!

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There came a knock on his door. Dirrul drew on his tunic as a stranger entered the room.

"The Chief is impatient—you must come at once."

Durril was led through a metal-roofed tunnel into a wide sunny transparent-walled room at the top of the building. The door closed behind him. He was alone with a tall smooth-faced man, exotically costumed in a tight black suit crusted with white jewels and framed by a white cloak thrown loosely around his shoulders. He sat back of a tremendous desk—behind his chair was a tilted panel of dials, levers and tiny glowing lights, running the length of the room under the ceiling-high window.

"It is always a pleasure to welcome a hero of the Vininese Confederacy," the Chief said without getting up. His tone was slow, tired, emotionless. His eyes were without expression. "May I ask your name?"

"Dirrul—Edward Dirrul."

"And you come from Agron with a message from our agent," he said, speaking Agronian. "So much we got from your teleray. In fifty days—actually forty-nine from now, by your time—your local Movement will have use for a Vininese space-fleet. I have already dispatched Sub-units B and C. Now, if you will give me the details of your Plan I can code-wave them to my commander."

"There's been a mistake, sir. What I really meant when I sent the message was—"

"So you've discovered the truth." The Chief's hand darted toward a cubicle of his desk and he held a metal-barreled weapon aimed steadily at Dirrul. "These things are always so tedious. Give me your disk."

"Of course," Dirrul agreed readily but as he felt in his pocket the Chief gestured negatively with his weapon.

"No, keep it." After a pause he added, "You're certain that you know, Dirrul?"

"I've seen the transmitters."

"Then why aren't you afraid? Why do you consent so readily? The others are always terrified—they'll confess to anything if I promise to let them keep the disks. Have you ever heard the sound, Dirrul? Do you really know what it's like?"

"You want information from me. You have no chance of getting it if you deprive me of the ability to think."

"Granted. And otherwise?"

"You won't get it either."

The Chief sighed wearily. "You are simply trading one romantic illusion for another. You have somehow convinced yourself that one man—one lone Agronian—can hold out against us. Let me tell you a little about our system, Dirrul, so you'll understand how futile it is to waste your time and mine like this." Not a trace of feeling came into his voice. He sounded slightly bored, reciting a matter-of-fact chronology of statistics.

"As you have guessed we create our leader-class on each of our planets by protecting them from the sound waves with the disks. If

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scattered groups among the general public should ever gain immunity—as far as we know only idiots and the deaf can do that—they could never carry out a successful revolt. The only way would be for the transmitter stations to be silenced.

"However, every unit operates independently on its own power. We have thousands of them on every planet. All but one could be destroyed, and that one transmitter would still be enough to control the planet. You begin to see, I think, that any kind of resistance is foolish. In time you can be made to do as I ask. Unfortunately, we have no time to spare.

"Perhaps you're thinking that outsiders—tourists, let's say—could come here and overthrow us. All rational beings in the galaxy are subject to the same physical laws. They still must hear and if they do they're powerless.

"Besides, our secret is remarkably well-kept. The tourists and merchants come to our planet in droves. They notice nothing—because of the amusing idiosyncrasy of Vininese customs men, who are required to stamp the hand of each visitor with an identification mark. The coloring material is atomically constituted to act as a temporary disk while the tourist is among us. He notices nothing amiss. He sees what we want him to see—he goes home favorably impressed—and by that time the mark has worn away. You get the general picture, Dirrul? Nothing can ever defeat us."

"Nothing but yourselves."

"Romantic nonsense! Let me show you what I can do, Dirrul, even when you wear a disk. I think you'll bargain then." The Chief turned a little to face the panel behind his desk, feeling over the dials while he kept Dirrul framed in his gunsight.

"The young man you went to this morning for help is a sadist. The reception was his idea—so was your bath. He likes to have our traitors—and you are a traitor, of course, to your own people—he likes to have them discover the truth before we take their disks away. It's an exquisite torture but in your case annoying, since it puts you in a position to bargain. Now it occurs to me that your host should be disciplined for his bungling."

The Chief pointed to the surface of his desk. "Watch the screen, Dirrul." An opaque rectangle glowed with light, slowly came into focus, and revealed a large mirrored lounge, where a number of official Vininese stood talking and drinking. The Chief twisted a dial, pulled a lever and one of the Vininese collapsed, writhing on the glassy floor in violent agony.

The screen went blank.

"I have not only decontrolled your friend's disk," the Chief explained blandly, "but I have doubled his receptability to sound. I can continue the treatment until he goes mad—or I can snap it off and let it serve as a warning.

"From this panel here I control every disk-wearer on Vinin—including yourself, Dirrul. You understand, I think, that there can never

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be any disloyalty among our leaders —they're consciously aware of the consequences. And revolt in the ranks is physically impossible. We're safe, you see, even from ourselves."

Once again there was a slight trace of emotion in the weary voice. "No doubt you also gather, Dirrul, who is the real ruler of Vinin. There are a hundred thousand of us, more or less, scattered throughout the Confederacy. All right—tell me what I need to know. If your Plan succeeds I'll deputize you for Agron when we annex it."

Suddenly Dirrul saw the answer. His heart leaped with joy and it was difficult to keep the feeling out of his voice when he said, "You have been talking to me in my own tongue." Carefully he inched toward the desk. "And understanding me."

"Entirely beside the point."

"Not entirely. You hear what I say—which means that you must wear a disk too."

Dirrul sprang across the desk. At the same time the Chief raised his weapon and fired. Flame seared Dirrul's cheek. A red mist welled before him and he reeled back against the control panel as the Chief fired again. The second explosion was so close it seemed to be within his own mind.

The Chief's hand clawed at Dirrul's tunic, ripping the disk away from him. Recoiling in anticipation of the dread shock wave, Dirrul hurled himself at the Chief.

But instead of the screaming terror he felt nothing. An inexplicable force seemed to close in on him. His head spun dizzily but his mind still functioned. He smashed his fist into the face of the Chief and the body sagged to the floor.

Dirrul stood bewildered, looking at his hand. A mass of flesh-like material, torn from the Chief's face, clung to his knuckles. Dirrul bent over the man and touched his skin. It crumbled under pressure and the lifelike purple coloring ran. Dirrul peeled the putty away until he could make out the shape of the pale wrinkled very aged face beneath.

Sickened he moved away—for he had seen the ruler of Vinin.

## IX

Dirrul backed into the desk, knocking a fragile statuette to the floor. When it lay shattered at his feet he understood why he could still plan and reason, even though the disk was gone. The Chief's shot, fired so close to his head, had deafened him either temporarily or permanently.

Dirrul ran to the control panel and twisted dials frantically, pulling every lever he could find. He had no idea what he was doing and it didn't matter so long as something happened. If he could decontrol even half the disks on Vinin it would create enough confusion to cover his own escape.

* * * * *

Twenty-five days later the Spacedragon shot up from the spacefield which was hidden among the stony Vininese mountain ravines. As it cut through the stratosphere Dirrul's bonds were released. He

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felt exhausted and empty. His last memory was of talking to Hurd on the mountain trail. Beyond that was a blank. He looked up at Glenna, as beautiful as ever but somehow more mature.

"You're all right now, Eddie?" she asked in a loud voice that betrayed her deafness.

"I think so. Where are you taking me?"

She touched her ears, still crudely bandaged. "You must say everything very slowly, Eddie. I haven't yet learned to read lips as well as Hurd does."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to Agron."

"We have no right, Glenna—we're traitors!"

"We have a duty to tell them the truth. What they do with us doesn't matter."

He shook his head weakly, still lost in his stupor. "Tell me what happened, Glenna—I can't remember anything."

"You got out of the government building and stole a Space-dragon. Then you came looking for us. Just after you met Hurd your hearing began to come back and of course you lost control of yourself. Hurd wanted to break your eardrums but I wouldn't let him.

"Since we had a space-ship at last we could get away from Vinin and I knew you'd be all right when we did. But it took us a month to steal enough fuel. Something you did in the government building paralyzed a lot of the leaders for a while but by the time we got around to looking for fuel the others had restored order again."

The door of the control room slid open and Hurd dropped down on the bunk beside Dirrul. "Feeling better?" he asked anxiously.

"I guess so. The whole picture's beginning to come back."

Hurd sighed with relief and his face relaxed.

Dirrul asked slowly, "How did you get away from them, Hurd?"

"I lost my hearing in the beating Sorgel gave me on Agron."

*"Sorgel!"* Dirrul repeated unbelievingly. It was the last illusion to go and for that reason the most painful. "Then it wasn't the Agronian police—"

"Of course it was Sorgel," Glenna said quietly. "He had to get rid of us because we wouldn't go along with him on the idea of a Vininese invasion. I tried so hard to tell you, Eddie, but I couldn't because of the drugs they gave us."

"The Vininese never knew I was deaf," Hurd went on. "It's easy enough to escape from a work camp when you can think for yourself. The Vininese resistance found me in the hills and I've been working with them ever since. A pitiful band of the deaf, fighting insurmountable odds to win back the human dignity of half the galaxy! But they won't turn tail and run and their numbers grow every time they raid a work camp."

"Were you with the men who kidnapped Glenna?"

"We were all out that night, trying to keep watch on the camps

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near the capital. We didn't know which one Glenna was in but I was sure the Vininese would try to reach her after they got your teleray message. We counted on the Vininese leading us to her and we knew we had to kidnap her first if we were to keep them from learning about the Plan on Agron.

"Unfortunately I wasn't with the group that picked you up, Eddie. They thought they had taken a Vininese leader and it seemed such a suitable punishment to take your disk away and let you hear the sound for a while. Later—after you'd escaped—when the others described your Air-Command uniform I took a chance and sent my note."

He helped Dirrul to his feet. "You'll have to take over from here on in, Eddie. You said you knew how to pilot this thing. I figured out a take-off but that's as far as I can go."

"Sorgel's pilot showed me once," he said. "What I don't remember I'll improvise. He said a Space-dragon could make the run in thirty days. This baby's got to do it in less than twenty-five if we're going to beat the Vininese fleet to Agron."

"You didn't tell them the Plan, did you, Eddie?"

"No."

"The Vininese won't land without instructions."

"Sorgel may get up enough courage to send a teleray code. We can't take any chances either."

Dirrul drove himself without rest. He cut every corner he knew, used every trick of navigational skill he had ever learned. Nonetheless it was twenty-eight days before the little ship hung in the air over the Agronian capital.

His heart sank. On the space-field, in neat ranks, the Vininese space-fleet was drawn up in proud review. The planet had fallen! Dirrul made his decision instinctively.

The Space-dragon wheeled and swept low over the field, its vicious guns blazing. The yellow clouds of destruction swept up toward the sky —the little ship was caught in the blazing flame. The interplanetary freight sheds loomed ahead. And the world exploded, falling apart into a soothing painless silence.

* * * * *

Dirrul opened his eyes and looked at the neutral blue of a hospital ceiling. Gradually he became conscious of Dr. Kramer, seated by the bed.

"Dr. Kramer!" Dirrul whispered. "Then everything's all right."

"If by everything you mean your companions, yes. There's even a chance we can restore the girl's hearing."

"And the Vininese?"

"Defeated."

"Dr. Kramer, we've got to destroy the Confederacy! I saw their transmitters—I know how their system works."

"Hush, Edward—I promised not to excite you. We know about it."

"Then how could you have been foolish enough to let them land?"

"It seemed a pity not to give a few of their people another chance. It's working out quite nicely too."

"I don't follow you, Dr. Kramer."

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"Long ago we became interested when tourists told us about the curious block-buildings on Vinin. Our physics boys worked out an ingenious device for analyzing their atmosphere. It was a little machine concealed in the lining of an ordinary air-freight crate, as I recall.

"A machine is quite objective, Edward—and Customs men don't stamp freight crates with the negative adaptors. When we learned that a Vininese fleet was going to land here we simply issued insulating helmets to all our people and let them come. As soon as we destroyed their portable transmitters the Vininese army proved quite adaptable to a new environment."

"Then—I did nothing to help when I destroyed their fleet?"

"Unfortunately you wounded two of our mechanics."

"I'm a traitor, Dr. Kramer. Even when I try I can't redeem myself!"

"Only on Vinin can you betray an external absolute, Edward. To an Agronian all objective concepts are relative to the subjective interpretations made by each individual. You can only be a traitor to yourself."

"The words are pleasant to say to a sick man but the fact remains—I would have betrayed Agron."

"But you didn't. Why not?"

"When I saw what their efficiency really meant—"

"You changed your mind before you knew about the transmitters?"

"Yes."

"Then you're libeling yourself. Don't trap yourself in another self-delusion, Edward. All that's happened is that you've grown up."

Dirrul said slowly, feeling for words that would express the idea as he felt it, "When I was in the center of the galaxy, looking out on space, I almost grasped a new concept but I lost it when the Agronian patrol attacked me. It's coming back.

"Time and space seem to be one and the same. Neither exists as an objective reality. There is no past and no future—all of it occurs eternally in the instant of my own being. I am everything and nothing—infinity and a speck lost in space."

"Thus you discover the Rational Potential." Dr. Kramer smiled. "I think you're ready for the space-pilot promotional, Edward." After a pause Dr. Kramer inquired, "Did you see the Chief of Vinin, Edward?"

"Then you know about that too?"

"I've guessed—it seems likely."

"I scraped off the putty and the face color. Beneath it he was an Earthman. A hundred thousand of them rule the Confederacy."

"All time and space, forever occurring for each of us in the instant of now! Yes, he would be an Earthman, Edward—quite logically. Both good and evil begin with the same source. Both have the same Rational Potential. The act of being has always been the same struggle of constant forces, between the absolute and the relative. The time never changes nor the event but merely the passing illusion of place."

Shaking his head the chubby professor departed. Dirrul closed his eyes, at peace with himself.

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# the house from nowhere

*by . . . . Arthur G. Stangland*

**New neighbors are always exciting. But the anachronistic MacDonalds offered a bit too much.**

THE morning paper lay unread before Philon Miller on the breakfast table and even the prospects of steaming coffee, ham, eggs and orange juice could not make him forget his last night's visitors.

On the closed-circuit Industrial TV screen glowed the words, *Food Preparation Center breakfast menu for July 24, 2052. No. 1, orange juice, coffee, ham and eggs. No. 2, waffle, coffee . . .*"

Automatically he punched the button for *No. 1.* Oh, his visitors had made matters appear justifiable. The presidential election campaign was going badly, Rakoff the chairman said, and his poll-quota for the election had been upped from twenty-five grand to fifty.

A stainless-steel capsule popped into the transparent wall dock. Of course the party quota system was taken for granted, he mused, removing the capsule, but it was an obligation you didn't welsh on. The muscle boys in the party organization saw to that. But still, fifty thousand . . .

Across the table John, his sixteen-year-old adopted son, stirred. "I guess you aren't as hungry as I am, Phil."

"What? Oh, sorry." John—down

*Time-travel continues to exercise its mesmeric fascination upon writers, readers and editors of science fiction alike. Probably because almost all of us, at one time or another, have longed greatly to visit either the future or the past. Perhaps, in view of the dangerous paradoxes such travel must involve, it is a good thing that such horological journeys have to date been confined to the printed page.*



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here for breakfast? What was the matter? The kid sick or something? Every morning he took his meal to his room to eat in solitude. Funny kid.

Philon removed the food capsule from the wall dock, stopping the soft gushing of air in the suction tube. Setting it on the table he snapped it open and removed the individual thermocels of food.

Philon poured coffee from the thermos and absently stirred in cream and sugar. Fifty thousand . . .

John was well into his breakfast already. "Phil, I was down to visit those people on the corner—you know, the house that appeared there over-night."

"Um."

"Their name is MacDonald," John said. "And they have a son, Jimmie, just my age, and a younger girl, Jean. Gosh, you ought to see the inside of their house, Phil. Old-fashioned! At the windows they got something called venetian blinds instead of our variable mirror thermopanes. And you know what? They don't even have an FP connection. They prepare all their meals in the house!"

John's excitement finally aroused Philon's attention. "No Food Preparation service? But that's unheard of!"

"They're sure swell people though."

"Where in the world did they come from?" Philon poured more coffee.

"Some place out West—Oregon, I think. Lived in a small town."

"How come their house appeared overnight?"

"Yeah, I asked them about that," John said. "They said their house is a prefab and it was cheaper to move it from Oregon than to buy one here. So they moved in one night—lock, stock and barrel."

John looked at Philon with a tentative air. "And another thing—Jimmie and Jean are their real children."

Philon began to frown in disgust. "Real children—how vulgar! No one does that anymore. That custom went out years ago with the Eugenic Act of two thousand twenty-nine. Breeding perfect children is the job of selected specimens. Why, I remember the day we passed our check over to Maternity Clinic! You were the best specimen in the place—and you carried the highest price tag too—ten thousand dollars!"

At that moment Ursula, his wife, her green rinse tumbling in stringy tufts over her forehead pattered into the breakfast room. Her right eye was closed in a tight squint against her cigarette smoke.

"Well, do I get my share of breakfast," she muttered, "or do I have to scrabble at the trough like the rest of the hogs around here?"

Philon nodded at a third thermocel in the capsule. "That's yours, Ursula." He fixed her with a cocked eye. "What time did that gigolo get you home this morning?"

Ursula blew the hair out of her eyes, then took a good look at her husband. "Why all the sudden concern about my affairs? I feel like going to the Cairo I call up Francois. He dances divinely. I feel like mak-

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ing love I call up Jose . . ." She shrugged. "So, I say, why the sudden concern? All these years you say nothing. Every minute away from home you're involved in big deals to make money, steal money—maybe even eat it."

He looked at her cryptically. "I've got to raise a fifty-grand quota."

Without even looking up from her breakfast Ursula said absently, "Oh, that. It *is* election year again, isn't it?"

"And I'll have to ask you to cancel all unnecessary expenditures for the time being."

She shook her head. "Can't—I've already reserved *Love's Passion* for this afternoon and a whole block of titles for three months."

Philon compressed his mouth, then practically blew the words at her. "Damn it, Ursula, you're spending too much time psycho-dreaming these cheap plays. You know the psychiatrist has warned you to lay off them. Stimulates your endocrine system too much. No wonder you live on sleeping pills."

"Oh, shut up!" She stared at him, the anger in her tugging at her loose mouth. "If I feel like a psycho-play I'm going to have me a psycho-play. It's the only stimulation I get any more."

Muttering, "T'hell with it!" Philon got up from the table and walked into the living room. Slipping into his gray top coat and hat he ascended to the copter roofport.

Before stepping into the copter seat he paused to study the MacDonald house on the corner. Odd-looking house at that. Mid-twentieth century, yet it looked brand new.

Then, putting the house out of mind, Philon shot his copter skyward and joined Skyway No. 7 traffic into town.

Descending on his office building he left the ship in care of the parking attendant and by elevator dropped to his floor. At a door marked *Miller Electronic Manufacturing Co.* he walked in.

In his office he slouched into his chair and stared at the small calendar on his desk. Rakoff wanted the fifty-thousand before Royal Pastel Mink Monday. One week—that wasn't very much time.

Flinching from the unpleasant problem, he stared at the city skyline, his mind drifting lazily. He thought about Royal Pastel Mink Monday. Some said it was just another Day dreamed up by furriers to make people fur-conscious. Others said it commemorated a period of great public indifference which cost large numbers their freedom to vote.

Of course the other party had their symbology too—like the Teapot Celebration. No one seemed to know for sure what it meant. Anyway, why worry how they started? Why did people knock on wood for luck—or throw salt over their left shoulder?

But then once in awhile there arose some who spelled out a strange lonely cry, calling themselves the conscience of the people. They spoke sternly of the thin moral fiber of the country, berating the

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people for what they called their amoral evolution brought on by indifference and negligence until they no longer could hear the still guiding voice of their conscience. But they were scornfully laughed down and it seemed to Philon he heard less and less of these men.

In the late afternoon a whip from party headquarters dropped in. "Hello, Feisel," Philon said with little enthusiasm for the swarthy-faced man.

Without even the formality of a greeting Feisel smiled down at Philon in a half-sneer. "Well, Philon, how we doin' with the fifty grand, eh?"

Philon tossed a sheaf of papers on the desk with a gesture of impatience. "Now look, I'll raise the fifty G's by the end of the week."

Feisel lifted a thin black eyebrow and shrugged elaborately. "Just inquiring, my friend, just inquiring. You know—just showing friendly interest."

"Well, go peddle your papers to somebody else. You make me nervous."

Feisel sniffed with injured pride. "That's gratitude for you. And just when I was going to put a little bee in your bonnet. I thought you'd like to know what happened to another guy just like you. You see, he got ideas, instead of digging to get his quota. He tried to lam out and you know where they found him? On the sidewalk below his twenty-third-floor window."

As Feisel went out, Philon swore softly at his retreating back. But Feisel's little story sent a chill through him.

That evening when he descended from his copter port and stepped into his living room he was surprised to hear young voices upstairs. Deciding to investigate he stepped on the escalator. At John's door he poked his head in.

"Hello."

A young blond-headed boy with bright clear eyes turned to look at him and a younger girl with short curly hair smiled back.

John said, "Phil, this is Jimmie, and Jean, his sister. They don't have a home-school teleclass rig yet, so they're attending with me."

"I see." Philon nodded to the children. "And how did you like your first day at school?"

"Fine," Jean said, beaming until her eyes almost disappeared. "It was fun. The teacher was talking about the history of atomic energy and when I told her we had one of the first editions of the famous Smyth report on *Atomic Energy* she was surprised."

"A first edition of the *Smyth Report?* No wonder your teacher was surprised." Through Philon's mind ran the recollection that first editions of the Smyth Report brought as high as seventy thousand dollars.

The children's excited chatter was suddenly interrupted by the front door chimes. Stepping to the wall televiewer, Philon pressed a button and said, "Who is it?"

A pleasant-faced man with a startled look said, "Oh—sorry. This gadget on the door-casing surprised

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me. Ah—I think my children, Jimmie and Jean, are here. I'm Bill MacDonald."

Behind him Philon heard Jean suppress a dismayed cry. "Gosh, Jimmie, it's late. Daddy's had to come for us!"

Philon said, "And I'm Phil Miller, MacDonald. Come in. We'll be down in a moment."

The MacDonald children and John headed for the stairs in a happy rush, ignoring the descending escalator, two steps at a time. Philon followed at a meditative pace, his thoughts trooping stealthily abreast. Seventy thousand dollars. Now, if he were to . . .

"Beautiful home you've got here, Miller."

Philon came out of his daydreaming to see MacDonald coming into view around the corner of a living room ell.

Philon took his extended hand. "Thanks. Glad you like it."

Jean broke in breathlessly. "Oh, Daddy, you ought to see how they conduct classes—by school TV. You write on a glass square and it appears immediately at the teacher's roll-board. And when you—"

Jimmie interrupted. "Aw, lemme tell 'im something too, Jean. Dad, John used a spare TV for Jean's freshman class while we 'showed' for junior class on his. Gosh, in history, Dad, their old newsreels go back to World War Two. I even saw your Marine unit—"

MacDonald cut his son short. "That's enough, Jimmie. You can tell us about it later." He herded his children toward the front door. "Thanks, Miller, for letting the kids use the school TV. I'm having one installed tomorrow."

After they left John said with a sparkle Philon had never seen before, "You know, Phil, those are the most interesting kids I've ever met. All the others I know are bored stiff. They've been everyplace and they've done everything.

"But Jimmie and Jean ask more questions about things than anybody I know. They're really interested. Every time I drop in on them they're studying history beginning with the middle of the Twentieth Century. They're absolutely fascinated and read it like fiction."

With more on his mind than his neighbors' unusual behavior Philon said, "Mmm." He stood looking at the boy for a long moment until John finally shifted self-consciously.

"What's the matter, Phil?"

Philon ended his musing. "Tomorrow night we're all going to call on the MacDonalds. And while we're there I want you to slip that copy of the *Smyth Report* out of their library."

For a moment the young boy's smooth face was a blank mask. Then it filled in with shocked surprise, then resentment and finally anger. "You mean—steal?"

"Of course. If they're too innocent to realize the value of the book that's their hard luck."

"But, Phil, I can't imagine myself stealing from . . ."

Impatiently, Philon said, "Since when did you suddenly get so

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holier-than-thou? Life is harsh, life is iron-fisted and if you don't keep your guard up you're going to get socked in the kisser."

John said slowly with a certain tone of shame, "Yes, I know. As far back as I can remember you've told me that. But in spite of it I can't help feeling it isn't right to treat the MacDonalds that way. They're too nice, too good."

"Look, John. You might as well learn the hard facts of life. All the high-sounding arguments for a moral world and all the laws on the books implementing those arguments are just eyewash. Sure, the President swears that he will uphold the constitution and enforce all the laws.

"Then we carefully surround him with counterspies—wire his rooms with dictaphones, slit his mail, install secret informers on his staff. All because no matter who the party is able to elect we don't trust him—because the society he represents does not trust itself."

"Is that why we have more and bigger jails than ever."

Philon shrugged. "All I'm trying to tell you is don't go soft-headed or the world will take your shirt."

The next day before leaving for the office Philon said to his wife, "Call up the MacDonalds and if they're going to be home tonight tell them we'll be over for a visit."

Ursula made a face. "Do we *have* to call on those people? They'll bore me stiff."

"For heaven's sake, Ursula! It's a matter of vital importance to me—and you also, if I have to appeal to your wide streak of selfishness."

"I can't see it."

"I'll explain later. I've got to go."

During the day Ursula called him. "Well, Phil, I called as you said and I've committed us for dinner tonight."

"Dinner! Hmm, they *are* convivial people."

"Yes and the dinner is going to be cooked right there in their house. How vulgar can some people get?"

That evening while dressing Ursula said, "Phil, John spends a lot of time at the MacDonalds'. What do you suppose he sees in them? It gets me the way he quotes them all the time and reports their least doings. Today he came tearing into the house and said, 'Ursula, it's wonderful!' I said, 'What's wonderful?' And John said, 'The dinner they're cooking at MacDonalds'. I've never smelled anything like it in all my life. Why don't we cook in our house like they do? Mrs. MacDonald was baking cookies and let me have one right out of the oven. Mmmm, boy was it *good!*'"

Ursula finished, "Now, I ask you, did you ever hear anything so barbaric—cooking in the house and having all the odors permeate the whole place?"

"Well, we'll see."

Later when they arrived at the MacDonalds' they were welcomed with a quiet warmth and friendliness that Philon cynically assumed to be a new and different front.

As they sat down to dinner Mrs. MacDonald, a rosy-cheeked woman

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with a quick and ready smile, said, "I'm sorry we aren't able to get a connection yet. So everything we're eating tonight is right out of our deep-freeze."

John Miller said, "Gosh, Mrs. MacDonald, as far as I'm concerned, I'd rather eat from your deep-freeze anytime than from the FP!"

Bill MacDonald looked across the table at Jean and said, "All right, Jean."

Jean and all the MacDonalds bent their heads and the girl began, "We thank Thee for our daily bread as by Thy hands . . ."

As the girl spoke Phil's gaze drifted around to his wife, who lifted her shoulders in mystified amazement. But it was a bigger surprise to see John's bent head. For the moment John was a part of this family—part of a wholeness tied together by an invisible bond. The utter strangeness of it shocked Philon into rare clarity of insight.

He saw himself wrapped up in his business with little regard for Ursula or John, letting them exist under his roof without making them a part of his life. Ursala with her succession of gigolos and her psycho-plays and John withdrawn into his upstairs room with his books. Then he closed his mind again as if the insight were too blinding.

What strange customs these MacDonalds had! Yet he had to admit the meal looked more appetizing than anything he had ever seen. It gave an impression of sumptuous plenty to see the food for everybody in one place instead of individually packaged under glistening thermocel. And instead of throwaway dishes they used chinaware that could have come right out of a museum.

Ursula asked, "What kind of fish is this?"

Bill MacDonald answered with a big grin. "It's Royal Chinook salmon that I caught in the fish derby on the Columbia River only last—"

Mrs. MacDonald colored suddenly. "You'll have to forgive Bill. He gets himself so wrapped up in his fishing."

Glancing at MacDonald Philon was surprised to see the same confusion and embarrassment on his host's face.

It was after dinner when Mrs. MacDonald and Jean were clearing the table that Philon looked over the library shelves. MacDonald himself appeared uneasy and hovered in the background.

"You'll have to excuse my selections. They're all pretty old. I—er—inherited most of them from a grandfather."

In a few minutes Philon spotted the *Smyth Report.* Fixing its position well in mind he turned away. MacDonald was saying, "Come down in the basement and I'll show you my hobby room."

"Glad to." As MacDonald led the way Philon whispered to John, "You'll find the book on the second shelf from the bottom on the right side."

John returned him a stony stare

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of belligerence and Philon clamped his jaw. The boy dropped his glance and gave a reluctant nod of acquiescence.

Upstairs a half hour later Ursula, who had filled her small ashtray with a mound of stubs, suddenly told Philon she was going home.

"But, Ursula, I thought that—"

With thin-lipped impatience she snapped, "I just remembered I had another engagement at eight."

Mrs. MacDonald was genuinely sorry. "Oh, that's too bad, I thought we could have the whole evening together."

Casting a meaningful glance at John and getting a confirming cold-eyed nod in return, Philon got on his feet. "Sorry, folks. Maybe we'll get together another time."

"I hope so," MacDonald said.

In angry silence Philon walked home. Not until they were all in the house and Ursula was hastening toward her second-floor room did he say a word. "I suppose your 'other engagement' means the Cairo again tonight?"

Ascending on the escalator Ursula turned to look scornfully over her shoulder. "Yes! Anything to escape from boredom. All that woman talked about while you were in the basement was redecorating the house or about cooking and asking my opinions. *Ugh!*"

Philon laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah, I guess she picked a flat number to discuss those things with. Anything you might have learned about them you must have got out of a psychoplay."

Stepping off the escalator at the top Ursula spit a nasty epithet his way, then disappeared into the upstairs hall.

John stood at the foot of the escalator, a reluctant witness to the bickering. Divining his attitude Philon mentally shrugged it off. The kid might as well learn what married life was like in these modern days.

"You got the book, eh?"

John pulled a book from his suit coat and laid it on a small table. "Yes, there's the book—and I never felt so rotten about anything in all my life!"

Philon said, "Kid, you've got a lot to learn about getting along in this world."

"All right—so I've got a lot to learn," John cried bitterly. "But there must be more to life than trying to stop the other guy from stripping the shirt off your back while you succeed in stripping off his!"

With that he took the escalator to the upper hall while Philon watched him disappear.

Left alone now, Philon settled into a chair by a window and stared down the street at the MacDonald house. Odd people—it almost seemed they didn't belong in this time and period, considering their queer ways of thinking and looking at things. MacDonald himself in particular had some odd personal attitudes.

Like that incident in his basement—Philon had curiously pulled open a heavy steel door to a small cubicle filled with a most complex arrangement of large coils and

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heavy insulators and glassed-in filaments. MacDonald was almost rude in closing the door when he found Philon opening it. He had fumbled and stuttered around, explaining the room was a niche where he did a little experimenting on his own. Yes, strange people.

The next day Philon eagerly hastened to a bookstore dealing in antique editions. Hugging the book closely Philon told himself his troubles were all over. The book would surely bring between fifty and a hundred grand.

A clerk approached. "Can I help you?"

"I want to talk to Mr. Norton himself."

The clerk spoke into a wrist transmitter. "Mr. Norton, a man to see you."

In a few moments a bulbous man came heavily down the aisle, peering through dark tinted glasses at Philon. "Yes?"

"I have a very rare first edition of Smyth's *Atomic Energy,*" said Philon, showing the book.

Norton adjusted his glasses, then took the book. He carefully handled it, looking over the outside of the covers, then thumbed the pages. After a long frowning moment, he said, "Publication date is nineteen forty-six but the book's fairly new. Must have been kept hermetically sealed in helium for a good many years."

"Yeah, yeah, it was," Philon said matter-of-factly. "Came from my paternal grandfather's side of the family. A book like this ought to be worth at the very least seventy-five thousand."

But the bulbous Mr. Norton was not impressed. He shrugged vaguely. "Well—it's just possible—" He looked up at Philon suddenly. "Before I make any offer to you I shall have to radiocarbon date the book. Are you willing to sacrifice a back flyleaf in the process?"

"Why a flyleaf?"

"We have to convert a sample of the book into carbon dioxide to geigercount the radioactivity in the carbon. You see, all living things like the cotton in the rags the paper is made of absorb the radioactive carbon fourteen that is formed in the upper atmosphere by cosmic radiation. Then it begins to decay and we can measure very accurately the amount, which gives us an absolute time span."

With a frustrated feeling Philon agreed. "Well okay then. It's a waste of time I think. The book is obviously a first edition."

"It will take the technician about two hours to complete the analysis. We'll have an answer for you—say after lunch."

The two hours dragged by and Philon eagerly hastened to the store.

When Mr. Norton appeared he wore the grim look of a righteously angry man. He thrust the book at Philon. "Here, sir, is your book. The next time you try to foist one over on a book trader remember science is a shrewd detective and you'll have to be cleverer than you've been this time. This book is, I'll admit a clever job, but nevertheless a for-

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gery. It was not printed in nineteen forty-six. The radiocarbon analysis fixes its age at a mere five or six years. Good day, sir!"

Philon's mouth fell open. "But—but the MacDonalds have had it for . . ." He caught himself, and stammered, "There must be some mistake because I . . ."

Norton said firmly, "I bid you good day, sir!"

With a sense of the sky falling in on him, Philon found himself out on the street. No one could be trusted nowadays and he shouldn't have been surprised at the MacDonalds. Everyone had a little sideline, a gimmick, to put one over on whoever was gullible enough to swallow it.

Why should he assume a hillbilly family from way out in Oregon was any different? This was probably Bill MacDonald's little racket and it was just Philon's bad luck to stumble on it. MacDonald probably peddled his spurious first editions down on Front Street for a few hundred dollars to old bookstores unable to afford radiocarbon dating.

For awhile he stared out his office window, brooding. The fifty grand just wasn't to be had—legally or illegally. And when he recalled Feisel's little gem about the man falling out his office window Philon was definitely ill.

Then the cunning that comes to the rescue of all scheming gentry who depend on their wits emerged from perverse hiding. An ingenious idea to solve the nagging problem of the fifty thousand arrived full-blown. Grinning secretively to himself, he walked into the telecommunications room.

He got the Technical Reference Room at the Public Library and asked for the detailed plans of the big electronic National Vote Tabulating machine in Washington. At the other end a microfilm reel clicked into place, ready to obey his fingertip control.

For two hours he read and read, making notes and studying the circuits of the complicated machine. Then, satisfied with his information, he returned the microfilm.

Leaving the office he descended to the streets and set out for the party headquarters. Now if only he could sell the neat little idea to the hierarchy . . .

At the luxurious marbled headquarters he asked to be let into the general chairman's office. The receptionist announced him and Philon walked in to find Rakoff awaiting him behind his beautiful carved desk.

Rakoff's dead-white cheeks never stirred and his stiff blond hair stood up in a rigid crew cut. He rolled his cigar in his big mouth. "Hello, Miller. What's on your mind?"

Philon took a breath and it seemed to him now that this idea was a crazy one. "I came to tell you I'm unable to raise my fifty grand quota, Rakoff."

The man's brows moved slightly and his eyes narrowed significantly. With a rasp in his voice he said deliberately, "That's too bad, Mr. Miller—for you."

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The rasping tongue put a faint quaver in Philon's voice but he went on. "However, I've brought you an idea that's worth more than fifty grand. It's worth millions."

Rakoff's eyes hardly blinked. "I'm listening—you're talking."

And Philon talked, talked rapidly and convincingly. When he finished Rakoff slapped his fat thigh in excitement.

That evening Philon dropped in on Bill MacDonald, who was sitting in his slippers smoking an old fashioned wood pipe.

"Come in, come in." MacDonald greeted him with a friendly smile. "I was just doing a little reading."

Philon held out the book. "I'm returning your masterpiece," he said with a sardonic smile.

MacDonald received it, glancing at the title. "Oh, Smyth's *Atomic Energy*. Good book—did you find it interesting?"

Philon began to laugh. "Well, I'll tell you, Bill, your little racket of having spurious first editions printed some place and then peddling them sure caught up with me."

The good-natured smile on MacDonald's face faded in a look of incredulity. He took the pipe from his mouth. "Spurious first editions?"

"Yeah, I sure took a beating today but I couldn't help laughing over it afterwards. Here I've been thinking of you folks as simon-pure numbers. But I got to hand it to you. You sure took me in with Smyth's *Atomic Energy* as being a genuine first edition." Philon went on to explain the radiocarbon dating of the book.

MacDonald finally broke in to protest, "But that book really *is* over a hundred years old." Then he looked up at his wife. "Of course, Carol, that's the explanation. The radiocarbon wouldn't decay a full hundred years any more than we . . ." Suddenly, he seemed to catch himself, as his wife raised a hand in apparent agitation.

"But why did you want to sell my book to a dealer?" MacDonald continued.

Philon went on to explain the system of the poll quota. He told him a lot of other things too about the election of a President and the organized political machines that levied upon all registered voters what amounted to a checkoff of their incomes.

Carol MacDonald said, "You mean that not everyone can vote?"

Philon looked at her in surprise. "Well, of course not. Only people of means vote—and why shouldn't they? They take the most interest in the elections and all the candidates come from the higher-middle-class of income. Anyway why should the people squawk? They took less and less interest in the elections.

"When the proportion of voters turning out for elections got down to thirty percent those that did turn out passed laws disenfranchising those who hadn't voted for two Presidential elections. So if things aren't being run to suit those who lost their rights to vote they've got no one to thank but themselves."

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Bill MacDonald looked at his wife and said in a voice filled with incredulity, "My lord, Carol, if the people back there only knew what their careless and negligent disinterest would one day do to their country!"

Philon looked from one to the other, saying, "You sound as if you were talking about the past."

MacDonald said hurriedly, "I—er—was referring to the history books."

That night Philon did not sleep well for the morrow would be a day he'd never forget. Even to his calloused mind the dangers involved in the exploit were considerable.

In the morning he went into John's room and stood looking down at the boy, who sleepily opened his eyes.

Philon said, "I'm going to be gone from my office all day. And if anyone calls or comes to see me here at the house tell him I'm sick. If necessary I'm ordering you to swear in court that I was here all day and night. Ursula's gone for the weekend to the seashore, so I'm depending on you. Do you understand?"

John frowned in confusion. "You say you're sick and staying home all day?"

Impatience edging his words Philon went over the explanation again.

"What d'you mean 'swear in court?' What are you planning to do, Phil?" John's eyes were wide open now and full of apprehension.

"Never mind what I'm doing. Just tell anybody inquiring that I'm sick at home."

"You mean *lie,* eh?"

Phil lifted his hand, then swung, leaving the imprint of his four fingers on the boy's left cheek. "Now do you understand?"

The boy blinked back a tear and nodded wordlessly.

In the late afternoon Philon landed at Washington and under an assumed name made his way to the government building housing the big Election Tabulator. At the technical maintenance offices Philon asked, "Is Al Brant around?"

"Nope. He doesn't come on duty until tomorrow."

At Brant's address Philon knocked on an apartment door. Footsteps approached inside and the door was opened by a medium-sized man with black tousled hair. He appeared less than happy to see Philon.

"Hello, Phil. What's on your mind?"

Philon stuck out his hand. "Al, glad to see you again. I know you're not pleased to see me but let's let bygones be bygones. Can we talk?"

Al Brant stepped back reluctantly. "Well, I guess so. I thought we'd said everything we had to say the last time."

Philon walked in and settled himself on the davenport. "Yeah, I know, Al, we had some pretty harsh words. But at least I got you out of the mess."

Brant said bitterly, "Yeah, got me out of a mess I got into helping you on one of your shady deals when I

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worked for you. Well, as I said before, what's on your mind?"

Philon patted his right chest saying, "Got a hundred thousand here for you, Al."

Brant's brows lifted in amazement. "A hundred thousand! What's the catch, Phil?"

Philon's voice dropped to a confidential tone. "You always were a clever man with electronics, Al, and I've got something here that's just your meat. I've been studying the design of the Election Tabulator, and I've discovered a wonderful opportunity for you and me.

"Now listen—it's possible to replace two transmitters on the main teletype trunk so that a winning percentage of the incoming votes will be totaled up for my party. Simple little job, isn't it? Worth a hundred thousand!"

For a long moment Al Brant sat and stared at Philon in cold silence. Finally, he said, "Do you know what the penalty is for jimmying the Tabulator to influence voting?"

"No."

"It's life imprisonment!" Brant got up slowly and started across the room to Philon. "I fell for your line once and got burned—and here you come again. You must think I'm a born sucker. This time I'm doing the talking. Give me the hundred grand or I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

Philon watched him coming as if he were witness to a nightmare. He was trapped. And in this moment of snowballing fear he ceased to think. The gun in his pocket went off without conscious effort. Brant stopped, then collapsed to the floor. Panic took over Philon's mind and he fled the apartment building as rapidly as was safe.

He was almost back in the city when he tuned in a news broadcast. As he listened, he sat in stunned silence. Brant had roused himself enough before he died to talk to the man who found him in his apartment. Brant had named his killer as Philon Miller. Miller felt as if he had turned to ice.

Then his mind thawed out with a rush of reassuring words. After all, why should he be worrying? He had John's word in court as a perfect abili. Yes, everything would be all right. Everything *had* to be all right.

In the late evening Philon arrived at his house with a consuming sense of great relief, as if the very act of entering his home would protect him from anything. There was a sense of safety in the mere familiarity of the environment.

On the mail table he found a note from Ursula saying she had gone for the weekend. Philon shrugged indifferently. He was glad to have her out of the way anyhow. But John—there was the best ten thousand dollars he had ever spent. A sound investment, about to pay its first real dividend.

*"John!"* His voice echoed in the house with a disturbing hollow sound. He wet his dry lips and shouted again, *"John*—where *are* you?"

Only his echoing voice answered him. In growing fright he pounded

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up the escalator and rushed into John's room. It was empty. On a desk he found a message in John's neat hand—

*Phil and Ursula,*

*For a long time I have been very unhappy living with you. I'm grateful for the food and shelter and education you've provided. But you have never given me the love and warmth that I seem to crave. The funny part of it is that I never understood my craving and what it meant until I saw how love and affection bound the MacDonald kids and their folks.*

*This afternoon Jimmie and Jean came over to say goodby because they said their father told them they didn't belong here—that he was taking his family back where they belonged, atomic bomb threat and all—whatever he meant by that. After they left I got to thinking how much I'd like to go with them. So I'm leaving. Somehow I'm going to talk them into taking me with them wherever they are going. So this will have to be good-by.*

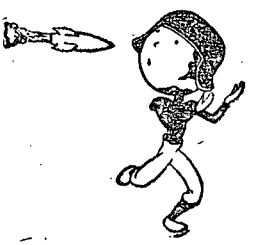
*John.*

Philon lifted his eyes from the note and his glance strayed to the window. Dreading to look he took two slow steps and peered down the street. The sight of the empty lot on the corner paralyzed him in his tracks.

John gone! The MacDonald house gone! Gone was his perfect alibi! In Washington a dying man's words had spelled out his own death sentence.

A step at the door roused him from his horror-stricken trance. He looked up to see a detective and a policeman regarding him with cold calculation.

"What's the matter, Miller?" asked the detective. "We've punched your announcer button half a dozen times. You deaf? You better come along to Headquarters to answer some questions about your movements today."



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# all cats are gray

*by . . . . Andrew North*

**Under normal conditions a whole person has a decided advantage over a handicapped one. But out in deep space the normal may be reversed—for humans at any rate.**

STEENA OF THE SPACEWAYS—that sounds just like a corny title for one of the Stellar-Vedo spreads. I ought to know, I've tried my hand at writing enough of them. Only this Steena was no glamour-babe. She was as colorless as a Lunar plant—even the hair netted down to her skull had a sort of grayish cast and I never saw her but once draped in anything but a shapeless and baggy gray space-all.

Steena was strictly background stuff and that is where she mostly spent her free hours—in the smelly smoky background corners of any stellar-port dive frequented by free spacers. If you really looked for her you could spot her—just sitting there listening to the talk—listening and remembering. She didn't open her own mouth often. But when she did spacers had learned to listen. And the lucky few who heard her rare spoken words—these will never forget Steena.

She drifted from port to port. Being an expert operator on the big calculators she found jobs wherever she cared to stay for a time. And she came to be something like the master-minded machines she tended—smooth, gray, without much personality of her own.

But it was Steena who told Bub Nelson about the Jovan moon-rites—and her warning saved Bub's life

*An odd story, made up of oddly assorted elements that include a man, a woman, a black cat, a treasure—and an invisible being that had to be seen to be believed.*



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six months later. It was Steena who identified the piece of stone Keene Clark was passing around a table one night, rightly calling it unworked Slitite. That started a rush which made ten fortunes overnight for men who were down to their last jets. And, last of all, she cracked the case of the *Empress of Mars.*

All the boys who had profited by her queer store of knowledge and her photographic memory tried at one time or another to balance the scales. But she wouldn't take so much as a cup of Canal water at their expense, let alone the credits they tried to push on her. Bub Nelson was the only one who got around her refusal. It was he who brought her Bat.

About a year after the Jovan affair he walked into the Free Fall one night and dumped Bat down on her table. Bat looked at Steena and growled. She looked calmly back at him and nodded once. From then on they traveled together—the thin gray woman and the big gray tomcat. Bat learned to know the inside of more stellar bars than even most spacers visit in their lifetimes. He developed a liking for Vernal juice, drank it neat and quick, right out of a glass. And he was always at home on any table where Steena elected to drop him.

This is really the story of Steena, Bat, Cliff Moran and the *Empress of Mars,* a story which is already a legend of the spaceways. And it's a damn good story too. I ought to know, having framed the first version of it myself.

For I was there, right in the Rigel Royal, when it all began on the night that Cliff Moran blew in, looking lower than an antman's belly and twice as nasty. He'd had a spell of luck foul enough to twist a man into a slug-snake and we all knew that there was an attachment out for his ship. Cliff had fought his way up from the back courts of Venaport. Lose his ship and he'd slip back there—to rot. He was at the snarling stage that night when he picked out a table for himself and set out to drink away his troubles.

However, just as the first bottle arrived, so did a visitor. Steena came out of her corner, Bat curled around her shoulders stole-wise, his favorite mode of travel. She crossed over and dropped down without invitation at Cliff's side. That shook him out of his sulks. Because Steena never chose company when she could be alone. If one of the manstones on Ganymede had come stumping in, it wouldn't have made more of us look out of the corners of our eyes.

She stretched out one long-fingered hand and set aside the bottle he had ordered and said only one thing, "It's about time for the *Empress of Mars* to appear again."

Cliff scowled and bit his lip. He was tough, tough as jet lining—you have to be granite inside and out to struggle up from Venaport to a ship command. But we could guess what was running through his mind at that moment. The *Empress of Mars* was just about the

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biggest prize a spacer could aim for. But in the fifty years she had been following her queer derelict orbit through space many men had tried to bring her in—and none had succeeded.

A pleasure-ship carrying untold wealth, she had been mysteriously abandoned in space by passengers and crew, none of whom had ever been seen or heard of again. At intervals thereafter she had been sighted, even boarded. Those who ventured into her either vanished or returned swiftly without any believable explanation of what they had seen—wanting only to get away from her as quickly as possible. But the man who could bring her in—or even strip her clean in space—that man would win the jackpot.

"All right!" Cliff slammed his fist down on the table. "I'll try even that!"

Steena looked at him, much as she must have looked at Bat the day Bub Nelson brought him to her, and nodded. That was all I saw. The rest of the story came to me in pieces, months later and in another port half the System away.

Cliff took off that night. He was afraid to risk waiting—with a writ out that could pull the ship from under him. And it wasn't until he was in space that he discovered his passengers—Steena and Bat. We'll never know what happened then. I'm betting that Steena made no explanation at all. She wouldn't.

It was the first time she had decided to cash in on her own tip and she was there—that was all. Maybe that point weighed with Cliff, maybe he just didn't care. Anyway the three were together when they sighted the *Empress* riding, her dead-lights gleaming, a ghost ship in night space.

She must have been an eerie sight because her other lights were on too, in addition to the red warnings at her nose. She seemed alive, a Flying Dutchman of space. Cliff worked his ship skillfully alongside and had no trouble in snapping magnetic lines to her lock. Some minutes later the three of them passed into her. There was still air in her cabins and corridors. Air that bore a faint corrupt taint which set Bat to sniffing greedily and could be picked up even by the less sensitive human nostrils.

Cliff headed straight for the control cabin but Steena and Bat went prowling. Closed doors were a challenge to both of them and Steena opened each as she passed, taking a quick look at what lay within. The fifth door opened on a room which no woman could leave without further investigation.

I don't know who had been housed there when the *Empress* left port on her last lengthy cruise. Anyone really curious can check back on the old photo-reg cards. But there was a lavish display of silks trailing out of two travel kits on the floor, a dressing table crowded with crystal and jeweled containers, along with other lures for the female which drew Steena in. She was standing in front of the dressing table when she glanced into the

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mirror—glanced into it and froze.

Over her right shoulder she could see the spider-silk cover on the bed. Right in the middle of that sheer, gossamer expanse was a sparkling heap of gems, the dumped contents of some jewel case. Bat had jumped to the foot of the bed and flattened out as cats will, watching those gems, watching them and—something else!

Steena put out her hand blindly and caught up the nearest bottle. As she unstoppered it she watched the mirrored bed. A gemmed bracelet rose from the pile, rose in the air and tinkled its siren song. It was as if an idle hand played . . . Bat spat almost noiselessly. But he did not retreat. Bat had not yet decided his course.

She put down the bottle. Then she did something which perhaps few of the men she had listened to through the years could have done. She moved without hurry or sign of disturbance on a tour about the room. And, although she approached the bed she did not touch the jewels. She could not force herself to that. It took her five minutes to play out her innocence and unconcern. Then it was Bat who decided the issue.

He leaped from the bed and escorted something to the door, remaining a careful distance behind. Then he mewed loudly twice. Steena followed him and opened the door wider.

Bat went straight on down the corridor, as intent as a hound on the warmest of scents. Steena strolled behind him, holding her pace to the unhurried gait of an explorer. What sped before them both was invisible to her but Bat was never baffled by it.

They must have gone into the control cabin almost on the heels of the unseen—if the unseen had heels, which there was good reason to doubt—for Bat crouched just within the doorway and refused to move on. Steena looked down the length of the instrument panels and officers' station-seats to where Cliff Moran worked. On the heavy carpet her boots made no sound and he did not glance up but sat humming through set teeth as he tested the tardy and reluctant responses to buttons which had not been pushed in years.

To human eyes they were alone in the cabin. But Bat still followed a moving something with his gaze. And it was something which he had at last made up his mind to distrust and dislike. For now he took a step or two forward and spat—his loathing made plain by every raised hair along his spine. And in that same moment Steena saw a flicker—a flicker of vague outline against Cliff's hunched shoulders as if the invisible one had crossed the space between them.

But why had it been revealed against Cliff and not against the back of one of the seats or against the panels, the walls of the corridor or the cover of the bed where it had reclined and played with its loot? What could Bat see?

The storehouse memory that had served Steena so well through the

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years clicked open a half-forgotten door. With one swift motion she tore loose her spaceall and flung the baggy garment across the back of the nearest seat.

Bat was snarling now, emitting the throaty rising cry that was his hunting song. But he was edging back, back toward Steena's feet, shrinking from something he could not fight but which he faced defiantly. If he could draw it after him, past that dangling spaceall . . . He had to—it was their only chance.

"What the . . ." Cliff had come out of his seat and was staring at them.

What he saw must have been weird enough. Steena, bare-armed and shouldered, her usually stiffly-netted hair falling wildly down her back, Steena watching empty space with narrowed eyes and set mouth, calculating a single wild chance. Bat, crouched on his belly, retreating from thin air step by step and wailing like a demon.

"Toss me your blaster." Steena gave the order calmly—as if they still sat at their table in the Rigel Royal.

And as quietly Cliff obeyed. She caught the small weapon out of the air with a steady hand—caught and leveled it.

"Stay just where you are!" she warned. "Back, Bat, bring it back!"

With a last throat-splitting screech of rage and hate, Bat twisted to safety between her boots. She pressed with thumb and forefinger, firing at the spacealls. The material turned to powdery flakes of ash—except for certain bits which still flapped from the scorched seat—as if something had protected them from the force of the blast. Bat sprang straight up in the air with a scream that tore their ears.

"What . . . ?" began Cliff again.

Steena made a warning motion with her left hand. *"Wait!"*

She was still tense, still watching Bat. The cat dashed madly around the cabin twice, running crazily with white-ringed eyes and flecks of foam on his muzzle. Then he stopped abruptly in the doorway, stopped and looked back over his shoulder for a long silent moment. He sniffed delicately.

Steena and Cliff could smell it too now, a thick oily stench which was not the usual odor left by an exploding blaster-shell.

Bat came back, treading daintily across the carpet, almost on the tips of his paws. He raised his head as he passed Steena and then he went confidently beyond to sniff, to sniff and spit twice at the unburned strips of the spaceall. Having thus paid his respects to the late enemy he sat down calmly and set to washing his fur with deliberation. Steena sighed once and dropped into the navigator's seat.

"Maybe now you'll tell me what in the hell's happened?" Cliff exploded as he took the blaster out of her hand.

"Gray," she said dazedly, "it must have been gray—or I couldn't have seen it like that. I'm colorblind, you see. I can see only shades of gray—my whole world is gray. Like Bat's

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—his world is gray too—all gray. But he's been compensated for he can see above and below our range of color vibrations and—apparently —so can I!"

Her voice quavered and she raised her chin with a new air Cliff had never seen before—a sort of proud acceptance. She pushed back her wandering hair, but she made no move to imprison it under the heavy net again.

"That is why I saw the thing when it crossed between us. Against your spaceall it was another shade of gray—an outline. So I put out mine and waited for it to show against that—it was our only chance, Cliff.

"It was curious at first, I think, and it knew we couldn't see it—which is why it waited to attack. But when Bat's actions gave it away it moved. So I waited to see that flicker against the spaceall and then I let him have it. It's really very simple . . ."

Cliff laughed a bit shakily. "But what *was* this gray thing? I don't get it."

"I think it was what made the *Empress* a derelict. Something out of space, maybe, or from another world somewhere." She waved her hands. "It's invisible because it's a color beyond our range of sight. It must have stayed in here all these years. And it kills—it must—when its curiosity is satisfied." Swiftly she described the scene in the cabin and the strange behavior of the gem pile which had betrayed the creature to her.

Cliff did not return his blaster to its holder. "Any more of them on board, d'you think?" He didn't look pleased at the prospect.

Steena turned to Bat. He was paying particular attention to the space between two front toes in the process of a complete bath. "I don't think so. But Bat will tell us if there are. He can see them clearly, I believe."

But there weren't any more and two weeks later Cliff, Steena and Bat brought the *Empress* into the Lunar quarantine station. And that is the end of Steena's story because, as we have been told, happy marriages need no chronicles. And Steena had found someone who knew of her gray world and did not find it too hard to share with her—someone besides Bat. It turned out to be a real love match.

The last time I saw her she was wrapped in a flame-red cloak from the looms of Rigel and wore a fortune in Jovan rubies blazing on her wrists. Cliff was flipping a three-figure credit bill to a waiter. And Bat had a row of Vernal juice glasses set up before him. Just a little family party out on the town.

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# the very black

*by . . . . Dean Evans*

**Jet test-pilots and love do not mix too happily as a rule—especially with a ninth-dimensional alter ego messing the whole act.**

THERE WAS NOTHING peculiar about that certain night I suppose—except to me personally. A little earlier in the evening I'd walked out on the Doll, Margie Hayman—and a man doesn't do that and cheer over it. Not if he's in love with the Doll he doesn't—not *this* doll. If you've ever seen her you'll give the nod on that.

The trouble had been Air Force's new triangular ship—the new saucer. Not radio controlled, this one—this one was to carry a real live pilot. At least that's what the doll's father, who was Chief Engineer at Airtech, Inc., had in mind when he designed it.

The doll had said to me sort of casually, "Got something, Baby." She called me baby. Me, one eighty-five in goose pimples.

"Toss it over, Doll," I said.

"No strings on you, Baby." She'd grinned that little one-sided grin of hers. "No strings on you. Not even one. You're a flyboy, you are, and you can take off or land any time any place you feel like it."

"Stake your mom's Charleston cup on that," I said.

She nodded. Her one-sided grin seemed to fade slightly but she hooked it up again fast. A doll—like I said. This was the original model, they've never gone into pro-

*Anders was pretty sure he was going to die. No one had yet flown the new-style jet job and lived to tell the tale. A story both chilling and heart-warming that shows us how bravely the human equation can operate when the chips are stacked against it.*



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duction on girls like her full-time.

She said, "Therefore, I've got no right to go stalking with a salt shaker in one hand and a pair of shears for your tailfeathers in the other."

"You're cute, Doll," I said, still going along with her one hundred percent.

"Nice—we get along nice."

"Somebody oughta set 'em up on that."

"So far."

"Huh?" I blinked. I hate sour notes. That's why I'm not a musician. You never get a sour note in a jet job—or if you do you don't get annoyed. That's the sour note to end all sour notes.

"Brace yourself, Baby," she said.

I took a hitch on the highball glass I was holding and let one eye get a serious look in it. "Shoot," I told her.

"This new job—this new saucer the TV newscasts are blatting about. You boys in the Air Force heard about it yet?"

"There's been a rumor," I said. I frowned. Top secret—in a pig's eyelash!

"Uh-huh. Is it true this particular ship is supposed to carry a pilot this time?"

"Where do they dig up all this old stuff?" I growled. "Hell, I knew all about that way way back this afternoon already."

"Uh-huh. Is it also true they've asked a flyboy named Eddie Anders to take it up the first time? This flyboy named Eddie Anders being my Baby?"

I got bored with the highball. I tossed it down the hole in my head and put the glass on a table. "You're psychic," I said.

She shrugged. "Good looking, maybe. Nice shape, maybe. Peachy disposition, maybe. Psychic, unh-unhh. But who else would they ask to do it?"

"A point," I conceded.

"Fork in the road coming up," the Doll said.

"Huh?"

"Fork—look. It'll be voluntary, won't it? You don't have to do it? They won't think the worse of you if you refuse?"

*"Huh?"* I gawked at her.

"I'm scared, Baby."

Her eyes weren't blue anymore. They'd been blue before but not now. Now they were violet balls that were laving me like somebody taking a last long look at the thing down inside the nice white satin before they close the cover on it for the final time.

"Have a drink, Doll," I said. I got up, went to the liquor wagon. "Seltzer? There isn't any mixer left."

"Asked you something, Baby."

I took her glass over. I handed it to her. My own drink I poured down that same hole in my head. I said finally, "Nice smooth bourbon but I like scotch better."

"They've already crashed four of this new type on tests, haven't they?"

I nearly choked. *That* was supposed to be the very pinnacle of the top secret stuff. But she was right of course. Four of the earlier models had cracked up. No pilots in them

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at the time—radio controlled. But jobs designed to carry pilots nevertheless.

"Some pitchers have great big ugly-looking ears," I said.

She didn't seem to mind. She said, "Or maybe I'm really psychic as you said. Or maybe my Dad's being Chief at Airtech has something to do with it."

"Somebody oughta stitch a zipper across his big fat yap," I said. "And weld the damn thing shut."

"He told only me," she said softly. "And then only because of you. You see, Baby, he isn't like us. He's got old fashioned notions you and I've got strings tied around each other already just because you gave me a ring."

I stared at her.

"Crazy, isn't it? He isn't sensible like us."

"Can the gag lines, Doll," I said sourly. "The old bird's okay."

And that fetched a few moments of silence in the room—thick pervading silence. A silence to be broken at any fractional second and heavy—supercharged—because of it.

I said finally, "Somebody has to take it up. It might as well be me. And they've already asked me."

"You could refuse, Baby."

"Sure I could. It's voluntary. They don't horsewhip a guy into it."

"Uh-huh—voluntary. And you *can* refuse." She stopped, waited, then, "Making me get right down there on the hard bare floor on both knees, Baby? All right. None of us should be proud. None of us has a right to be proud, have we?

"All right, Baby. I'm down there—way, way down there. I'm asking you not to take that ship up. I'm begging you—begging, Baby. Look, on me you've never seen anything like this before. Begging!"

I looked at my empty glass. The taste in my mouth was suddenly bitter. "No strings, we said," I said harshly. "A flyboy, we said. Guy who can take off and land anywhere, anytime he likes. Stuff like that we just got through saying."

She didn't answer that. I waited. She didn't answer. I got up finally, got my lousy new officer's cap off the TV set and went over to the door. I opened the door. I went on through.

But before I closed it I heard her whisper. That's the trouble with whispers, they go incredible distances to get places. The whisper said, "That's right, Baby. Right as rain. No strings—*ever!*"

* * * * *

When you don't have any scotch in the house you'd be surprised how well rum will do—even Jamaica rum. I was on my own davenport in my own apartment and there were two shot glasses in front of me. I was taking turns on them so they wouldn't wear out. And what was keeping these glasses busy was me and a fifth of the Jamaica rum in my right hand. And that's when it all began.

Across the room a rather stout woman was needling a classic through the television screen and at the same time needing a shave rather badly. I wasn't paying any attention

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to her. I was thinking about the Doll. Wondering, worrying a little. And that's when it began.

That's when the voice said, "Mr. Anders, would you do me the goodness to forget that bottle for a moment?"

The voice seemed to be coming from the TV screen although the stout lady hadn't finished her song. The voice was like the disappointed sigh of a poor old bloke down to his last beer dime and having to look up into the bartender's grinning puss as the bartender downs a nice bubbly glass of champagne somebody bought for him. Poor guy, I thought. I downed glass number one. And then glass number two. And then I looked over at the TV screen.

That sent a little shiver up my spine. I dropped my eyes to the glasses, filled them once more. Strong stuff, Jamaica rum. At the first the taste is medicine. A little later the taste is pleasant syrup. And a little later still the taste is delightful. But strong—the whole way strong. I downed glass number one.

I figured I wouldn't touch glass number two yet. I brought up my eyes, let them go over to the TV screen again.

He didn't have any eyes. That was the first thing that struck me. There were other things of course, such as the fact he didn't have any arms or legs. He didn't have any head either, in case he had eyes in the first place. He was a black swirling bioplastic mass of something or other and he was doing a graceful tango directly in front of the TV screen, thereby blocking off from view the stout woman who needed a shave.

He said, "Do you have any idea what I am, Mr. Anders?"

"Sure," I said. "Somebody's blennorrheal nightmare."

"Incorrect, Mr. Anders. This substance is not mucous. Mucous is very seldom black."

"Mucous is very seldom black," I mimicked.

"Correct, Mr. Anders."

So all right. So they were making Jamaica rum a little stronger these days. So *all right!* Next time I wouldn't get rum, I'd get scotch. Hell with rum. I dismissed the thought from my mind. I picked up glass number two, downed it. I wondered if the Doll was feeling sorry for herself.

"Incorrect, Mr. Anders," he said. "The rum is no stronger than usual."

I jerked. I stared at the black sticky-looking thing he was. I shut my eyes tightly, snapped them open again. Then I worked the glasses again with the bottle.

"Don't be shocked, Mr. Anders. I'm not a mind reader. It's just that you discarded the thought of a moment ago. I picked it up, see?"

"Sure," I said. "You picked it out of the junk pile of my mind, where all my little gems go."

"Correct, Mr. Anders."

It was about time to empty the glasses again. I varied the routine this time by picking up number-two glass first.

"Light a cigarette, Mr. Anders."

I'm a guy to go along with a gag.

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I fished a cigarette out, lit it. "Lit," I said. And just at that instant the stout dame without the shave hit a sour one way up around A above high C. My ears cringed. I forgot the cigarette and glared across the room, trying to see through the black swirling mass that stood in front of the TV screen.

"Puff, Mr. Anders."

I puffed. The puff sounded like somebody getting his lips on a very full glass of beer and quickly sucking so that foaming clouds don't go down the sides of the glass and all over the bar. I didn't have any cigarette.

*"Ah!"*

I blinked. The black swirling mass was going gently to and fro. At about head height on a man my cigarette was sticking out from it and a little curl of smoke was coming from the end. Even as I looked the curl ceased and then a big blue cloud of smoke barreled across the room toward my face.

"Your cigarette, Mr. Anders."

"Nice trick," I said. "Took it out from between my lips and I never felt it. Nice trick."

"Incorrect, Mr. Anders. When the singer flatted that particular note your attention was diverted momentarily. Your senses are exceptional, you see. Your ears register pain at false sounds. Therefore, you discarded the thoughts of your cigarette during the moment you suffered with the singer. Following this reasoning, your cigarette went into abandonment. And I salvaged it. No trick at all, really."

I thought, to hell with the shot glasses. I put the rum bottle to my lips and tilted it up and held it there until it wasn't good for anything anymore. Then I took it down by the neck and heaved it straight at the black mass.

The television screen didn't shatter, which proved something or other. The bottle didn't even reach the screen. It hit the black swirling mass about navel high. It went in, sank in like slamming your fist into a fat man's stomach. And then it rebounded and clattered on the floor.

"Scream!" I said thickly. "You dirty black delusion—scream!"

"I *am* screaming, Mr. Anders. That hurt terribly."

He sort of unfolded then, like unfolding a limp wool sweater in the air. And from this unfolding, something came forth that could have been somebody's old fashioned idea of what a rifle looked like. He held it up in firing position, pointed at my head.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Anders. This is to convince you. A gun, yes, a very old gun—a Brown Bess, they used to call it. I just took it from the City Museum, where it was on display."

He had a nice point-blank sight on my forehead. Now he moved the gun, aimed it off me, pointed it across the room toward the open windows.

"Note the workmanship, Mr. Anders. Note the stock. Someone put a little effort on the carving. Note the sentiment carved here."

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The rum was working hard now. I could feel it climbing hand over hand up from my knees.

"Let me read what it says, Mr. Anders—*'Deathe to ye Colonies'*. Note the odd wording, the spelling. And now watch, Mr. Anders."

The gun came up a trifle, stiffened. There was a loud snapping sound, a click of metal on metal—Flintlock. As all the ancient guns were.

And then came the roar. Wood across the room—the window casing—splintered and flew wildly. Smoke and smell filled my senses.

He said, chuckling, "Let's call it the Abandonment Theory for lack of a better name. This old Brown Bess hasn't been thought of acquisitively for some years. It's been in the museum—abandoned. Therefore subject to the discarded junk pile as you yourself so cleverly put it before. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Anders?"

Perfectly—oh, perfectly, Mr. Bioplast. The rum was going around my eyes now. Going up and around and headed like an arrow for the hunk of my brain that can't seem to hide fast enough.

I guess I made it to the bedroom but I wouldn't put any hard cash on it. And I guess I passed out.

* * * * *

The morning was a bad one as all bad ones usually are. But no matter how bad they get there's always the consoling thought that in a few hours things will ease up. I hugged this thought through a needle shower, through three cups of coffee in the kitchen. What I was neglecting in this reasoning was the splintered wood in the living room.

I saw it on my way out. It hit me starkly, like the blasted section of a eucalyptus trunk writhing up from the ground. I stopped dead in the doorway and stared at it. Then I got out my knife and got at it.

I probed but it was going to take more than a pocket knife. The ball—and it was just that—was buried a half inch in the soft pine of the casing.

I closed the knife and went to the phone and got Information to ring the museum.

"You people aren't missing a Brown Bess musket," I said. It was a question, of course, but not now—not the way I had said it. "Nobody stole anything out of the museum last night, did they?"

Sweat was oozing over my upper lip. I could feel it. I could feel sweat wetting the phone in my hand. The woman on the other end told me to wait. I said, "Yeah"—not realizing. I waited, not realizing, until a man's voice came on.

"You were saying something about a Brown Bess musket, mister?" A cold sharp voice—a gutter voice but with the masking tag of *official* behind it. Like the voice of someone behind a desk writing something on a blotter—a real police voice.

I put the phone down. I pulled all the shades in the living room, went out the door, locked it behind me and drove as fast as you can make a Buick go, out to the field. But *fast!*

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The XXE-1 was ready. She'd been ready for weeks. There wasn't a mechanical or electronic flaw in her. We hoped, *I* hoped, the man who designed her hoped. The Doll's father— he hoped most of all. Even lying quiescent in her hangar, she looked as sleek as a Napoleon hat done in poured monel. When your eyes went over her you knew instinctively they'd thrown the mach numbers out the window when she was done.

I went through a door that had the simple word *Plotting* on it.

The Doll's father was there already behind his desk, studying something as I came in. He looked up, smiled, said, "Hi, guy."

I flipped a finger at him. I wondered if the Doll had told him about last night.

"Wife and I were going to suggest a snack when we got home last night but you had already gone, and Marge was in bed."

I didn't look at him. "Left early, Pop. Growing boy."

"Yeah. You look lousy, guy."

I put my teeth together. I still didn't look at him. "These nights," I said vaguely.

"Sure."

I could feel something in his voice. I took a breath and put my eyes on his. He said, "I'm a hell of an old duck."

"Not so old, Pop."

"Sure I am. But not too old to remember back to the days when I wasn't too old." There was a grave look in his eyes.

I didn't have to answer that. The door banged open and Melrose, the LC, came in. He jerked a look at both of us, butted a cigarette he'd just lit—lighted another, butted that. He ran a hand through thick graying hair and frowned.

"Anybody got a cigarette?" he said sourly. "Couldn't sleep last night. This damned responsibility. Worried all night about something we hadn't thought of."

Pop looked up. Melrose went on. "Light—travels in a straight line, no?" He blinked small nervous eyes at us. Then, "Can't go around corners unless it's helped, you see. I mean just this. The XXE-One is expected to hit a significant fraction of the speed of light once it gets beyond the atmosphere. Now here's the point—how in hell do we control it then?"

He waited. I didn't say anything. Pop didn't say anything. Melrose ran a hand through his hair once more, muttered *goddamit* to himself, turned around and went barging out the door.

Pop said wryly, "Another quick memo to the Pentagon. He never heard of the Earth's gravity."

"He's heard," I said. "It's just that it slipped his mind these last few years."

Pop grinned. He handed me a sheaf of typewritten notes. "These'll just about make it. You'll notice the initial flight is charted pretty damn closely."

"Thanks, Pop. I better take these somewhere else to look 'em over. Melrose might be back."

"Pretty damn closely," he repeated.

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"Almost as closely as if she was going up under radio control . . ." He stopped. He looked at me from under his eyebrows.

I studied him. "Already told the brass I'd take her up, Pop." I kept my voice down.

"Sure, guy. Sure. Uh—you mention it to Marge?"

"Last night."

"I see." His eyes got suddenly far away. I left him like that. Hell with him—hell with the whole family!

* * * * *

It was in the evening paper, tucked in the second section. They treated it lightly. It seemed the night watchman had opened the rear door of the museum for a breath of air or maybe a smoke. Or maybe to kitchie-koo some babe under the chin in the alley.

That's the only way it could have happened. And he'd discovered the empty exhibit case at 2:10 in the morning. The case still had a little white card on it that told about the Brown Bess musket and the powder horn and the ball shot inside.

But the little white card lied in its teeth. There weren't any such things in the case at all. And he'd notified the curator at once.

There was also mention of a mysterious phone call which couldn't be traced.

Things like this don't happen in 1953. So I didn't get loaded that night. I went home, went to the davenport, sat down and told myself they don't happen. Things like this have never happened, will never happen. What occurred last night was something in the bottom of a bottle of Jamaica rum.

"Thinking, Mr. Anders?"

I took a slow breath. He was swaying gently in the air a foot from my elbow and he was still a black mucous scum, as he had been the night before. I got up.

I said, "I'm not loaded tonight. I haven't had a thing all day." I took two steps toward him.

He wasn't there.

I took another breath—a very very slow breath. I turned around and went back to the davenport.

He was back again.

"They'll find that musket," he said. "I have no use for it now. You see I wanted it only to convince you, Mr. Anders."

I put my hands on my knees and didn't look at him. I was suddenly trying to remember where I'd put that Luger I'd brought home from Germany a couple years back.

"You're not quite convinced yet, Mr. Anders?"

*Where in the hell did I put it?*

"Very well, Mr. Anders. Now hear this, please. Now watch me." He stirred at about hip height. A shelf-like section of the black mass protruded a little distance from the main part of him. On this shelf suddenly lay a rusted penknife.

"A very little boy, Mr. Anders. And a very long while ago. A talented boy, one of those who has what might be called an exceptional imagination. This boy cherished a penknife when he was quite small. Pick up the knife, Mr. Anders."

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The knife was suddenly in my lap. I picked it up. It was rusty. It had a flat bone handle. "Museums again," I whispered to myself.

"So highly did this boy prize his knife that he went to great pains to carve his name very very carefully on one side of the bone handle. Turn the knife over, Mr. Anders."

The name was Edward Anders.

"You lost it when you were eleven. You wouldn't remember though. I found it in an attic where it lay unnoticed. As the years went by you gradually forgot about the knife, you see, and when your mind had completely abandoned the thoughts of it, it was mine—had I wanted it. As a matter of fact I didn't. I retrieved it just today."

I put the knife down. Sweat was coming on my forehead now, I could feel it. I was remembering. I was remembering the knife and what was scaring me even more was I was remembering the very day I had lost it. In the attic.

I said very carefully, "All right. You've made your point. You can take it from there."

"Quite so, Mr. Anders. You now admit I exist, that I have extraordinary powers. I am your own creation, Mr. Anders. As I said before you have exceptional senses, including imagination. And yes, imagination is the greatest of all the senses.

"Some humans with this gift often imagine ludicrous things, exciting things, horrifying things—depending don't you see, on mood, emotion. And the things these mortals imagine become real, are actually created—only they don't know it, of course."

He stopped. He was probably giving me time to soak that up. Then he went on. "You've forgotten to keep trying to remember where you put that Luger, Mr. Anders. I just picked up the abandoned thought as it left your consciousness just now."

I gulped down something that tried to rise in my throat. I didn't like this guy.

"You created me when you were fourteen, Mr. Anders. You imagined me as a swashbuckling pirate. The only difference between me and the others who have been created in times past is that I have attained the ninth dimension. I am the first to do that. Also the first to capture the secrets of your own third dimension. Naturally then, it would be a pity for me to die."

"Get out," I said.

"Forgive me, Mr. Anders. My time is short. I die tomorrow."

"That's swell. Now get out."

"We're not immortal, you see. When our creators die their imaginations die with them. We too die. It follows. But for some time I've had an idea."

"Out," I said again. "Get the hell out of here!"

"You're going to die tomorrow, Mr. Anders, in that new flying saucer. And I must die with you. Except that I've had this idea."

There are times when you look yourself in the eye and don't like what you see. Or maybe what you

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see scares the living hell out of you. When those times come along some little something inside tells you you'd better watch out. Then the doubts creep in. After that the melancholy. And from that instant on you aren't very sane anymore.

"*Out!*" I yelled. "Out, *out*, OUT! Get the hell out!"

"One moment, Mr. Anders. Now as to this idea of mine. There's this woman—this Margie Hayman. This woman you call the Doll."

That one jerked me around.

"Exactly. Now listen very carefully. You aren't entirely you anymore, Mr. Anders. I mean, you aren't the complete *whole* individual you as you once were. You love this woman. Something inside you has gone out and is now a part of her.

"Therefore, if you will just discard the thought of her sometime between now and when you take that ship up I can attach myself to her sentient being, don't you see, and thereby exist—at least partly—even though you yourself are dead."

I pushed myself unsteadily to my feet. I stared at the entire black repulsive undulating mass before me. I took a step toward it.

"It isn't much to ask, Mr. Anders. You've quarrelled with her. You want no more of her. You've practically told her that. All I ask is that you finish the job—forget her. Discard her—throw her into the mental junk pile of Abandonment."

I didn't take any more steps. Something inside me was screaming, was ripping at my guts; was roaring with all the cacophony of all the giant discords of all eternity. Something inside my brain was sucking all my strength in one tremendous, surging power-dive of wish fulfillment. I was willing the black mucous mass of him out of my consciousness.

He was no longer there. The only thing to prove he'd ever been there at all was a very-old, very-rusty penknife over on the table in front of the davenport—the knife with my name carved on the bone handle.

After that I went unsteadily to the dresser in the living room. I got the Doll's picture down off the dresser. I undressed. I took the picture to bed with me. The lights burned in my bedroom the entire night.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Colonel Melrose looked weatherbeaten. His graying hair was pulled here and there like a rag mop that's dried dirty—stiff. He had a freshly lit cigarette between his lips. He grinned nervously when he saw me, butted the cigarette, said in a thin voice, "This is it, Anders. Ship goes up in twenty minutes."

"I know," I said.

He poked another cigarette at his lips. He said, "What?" in a startled tone.

"Nothing," I said. "All right, I'll get ready."

He lit the cigarette, took a puff that made the smoke do a frenetic dance around his nostrils. He jabbed it at an ashtray, bobbed his head in a convulsive movement, said, "Righto!"

They strapped me in. Pop came to

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the open hatch. He stuck his head in, grinned, said, "Hi, guy," softly. There was something in his eyes. The Doll had told him how I hate sour notes.

"How's the Doll, Pop?" I forced myself to say it.

"Swell, Ed. Just got a call from her. On her way out here to see you take off. Looks like she won't make it now though."

I didn't say anything. His eyes went down to the wallet I had propped up on my knees. The wallet was open, celluloid window showing. Inside the window was the Doll's picture.

"Tell her that, Pop," I said.

"Yeah, guy. Luck."

They shut the hatch.

There was no doubt about the takeoff. If one thing was perfected in the XXE-1 it was that. The ship rose like the mercury in a thermometer on a hot day in July. I took it slow to fifty thousand feet.

"Fifty thousand," I said into the throat mike.

"Hear you, Anders." Melrose's voice.

"Smooth," I said. "Radar on me?"

"On you, Anders."

I let the ship have a little head. This job used the clutch of a tax collector's claws for fuel. It just hooked itself on the nothing around us and yanked—and there we were.

One hundred thousand.

"Double that," I said into the mike.

"Yeah, Anders. How is it?"

"Haven't yet begun. Radar still on me?"

I heard a nervous laugh. *He* was nervous. "The General—General Hotchkiss just said something, Anders. He—ha, ha—he said you're on plot like stitches in a fat lady's hip. Ha, ha! He's got *us* all in stitches. Ha, ha!"

*Ha, ha!*

This was it. I released my grip on the accelerator control, yet it slide up. They say you can't feel speed in the air unless there's something relative within vision to tip you off. They're going to have to revise that. You can not only feel speed you can reach out and break hunks off it—in the XXE-1, that is. I shook my head, took my eyes off the instruments and looked down at the Doll on my lap.

"Melrose?"

"Hear you, Anders."

"This is it. Reaching me on radar still?"

"Naturally."

"All right."

This was it. This was where the other four ships like the XXE-1—the radio controlled models—had disintegrated. This was where it happened, and they didn't come back anymore.

I sucked in oxygen and let the accelerator control go over all the way.

Pulling a ship out of a steep dive, yes. Blackout then, yes. If the wings stay with you everything's fine and you live to mention the incident at the bar a little while later. Blackout accelerating—climbing—is not in the books. But blackout, nevertheless. Not just plain blackout but a

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thick mucous slimy undulating blackout—the very black.

The very very black.

* * * * *

General Hotchkiss, "What's he saying, Melrose?"

Melrose, "Doesn't answer."

General Eaton, "Try again."

Melrose, "Yes sir."

General Hotchkiss, "What's he saying, Melrose?"

General Eaton, "Still nothing?"

Melrose, "Nothing."

General Hotchkiss, "Dammit, you've still got him on radar, haven't you?"

Melrose, "Yes sir."

General Hotchkiss, "Well, dammit, what's he doing?"

Melrose, "Still going up, sir."

General Eaton, "How far up?"

Melrose, "Signal takes sixty seconds to get back, sir."

General Hotchkiss, "God in heaven! One hundred and twenty thousand miles out! Halfway to the moon. How much more fuel has he?"

Melrose, "Five seconds, sir. Then the auto-switch cuts in. Power will go off until he nears atmosphere again. After that, if he isn't conscious—well, I'm awfully afraid we've lost another ship."

General Eaton, "Cold blooded—"

* * * * *

The purple drapes before my eyes were wavering. Hung like rippled steel pieces of a caisson suspended by a perilously thin whisper of thread, they swayed, hesitated, shuddered their entire length, then began to bend in the middle from the combined weights of thirteen galaxies. The bend became a cracking bulge that in another second would explode destruction directly into my face. I screamed.

"Is—is that you, Anders?"

I screamed good this time.

"An—Anders! You all right? What happened? I couldn't get through to you?"

I took my hand from the accelerator control and stared numbly at it. The mark of it was deep in the skin. I sucked in oxygen.

"*Anders!* Your power is off. When you hear the signal you've got just three more seconds. You know what to do then. You've been out of the envelope, Anders! You broke through the atmosphere!"

And then I heard him speak to somebody else—he must have been speaking to somebody else, he couldn't have meant me—"Crissake, give me a cigarette. The guy's still alive."

I suppose I was grinning when they unstrapped me and slid me out of the hatch. They were grinning back at any rate. The ground held me up surprisingly—like it always had all my life before. They'd stopped grinning now, their eyes were eating the inside of the ship. They weren't interested in me anymore—all they wanted was the instruments' readings.

My feet could still move me. Knew where to go. Knew where to find the door that had the simple word *Plotting* on it.

The Doll was there with her father. The two of them didn't say

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anything, just looked at me—just stared at me. I said, "He tried damned hard. He put everything he had in it. He got me. He had me down and there wasn't any up again for the rest of the world. For me there wasn't."

They stared. Pop stared. The Doll stared.

"Just one thing he forgot," I muttered. "He gave me the tip-off himself and then he forgot it. He told me I wasn't all me anymore, that a part of me had gone out to you since I was supposed to be in love with you. And that's where the tip-off lies. I wasn't all me anymore but I hadn't lost anything. You know why, Doll?"

They stared.

"Simple—any damn fool would tumble. If I wasn't all me, then you weren't all you. Part of you was me—get it? And *you* weren't scheduled to bust out today. Not you—me! And that's what he couldn't work over. That's what brought me down again. He couldn't touch that." I stopped for a moment.

I said suddenly, "What the hell you guys staring at?" I growled.

"That's my Baby," said the Doll.

"No strings," I said.

"Like we said." Her words were soft petals. "Like we said, Baby. Just like we said."

"Sure. Only damn it, I don't like it that way. I *want* strings, see? I want meshes of 'em, balls of 'em, like what comes in yarn—get it?"

The Doll grinned. "Sure, Baby—you're sure you want it that way?"

"Sure I'm sure. I just said it, didn't I? *Didn't* I?"

"You just said it, Baby." She left her father's side, came over to me, put her arm in mine, pulled close. We turned, started to go out the door.

"Where you guys going?" asked Pop. We turned again. He looked like something was skipped somewhere on a sound track he'd been listening to. I grinned.

"Gotta look for a Brown Bess," I said. "Museum just lost one."

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# the sepulchre of jasper sarasen

*by . . . . H. Russell Wakefield*

**Modern mathematics could not protect Sir Reginald from the evil that rose from a murderer's tomb.**

SIR REGINALD RAMLEY was by temperament and inclination no frequenter of cemeteries. Such dormitories depressed him mildly, not so much because they reminded him of Man's mortality, against which he cherished no grudge, as because they provided even further proof, if such were needed, of Man's inanity, vulgarity and sentimentality.

Why, for example, spend good and often ill-spared money on headstones and plinths, or even artistically execrable emblematic figures and designs, when a few quick years would weather their inscriptions into illegibility and—a little later—level the pious metal with the ground?

And the asininity of those optimistic mottoes which usually figured thereon! *Till we meet again . . . Till a brigther dawn . . .* and so on. Never satisfied! How much better the incomparable reality, a dreamless sleep!

It was, therefore, by mere chance that he entered the vast Death Field near his new West London home. He was strolling past it one Sunday morning in May when he heard coming from one of its trees, now proudly preening themselves in their new livery, the liquid tinkle of a

*The so-called Gothic story reached its peak during the first half of the nineteenth century—with such spooky giants as Horace Walpole, Mary Wollstonecraft, Bulwer-Lytton and many others. Yet the Gothic story will survive as long as darkness falls. Mr. Wakefield, one of the foremost modern practitioners of the sheer horror story, here offers a tale that, for complete terror, should scare anybody's pants right off.*



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willow warbler. To so keen, if intermittent, an ornithologist this was a matter of import, a willow warbler within four and a half miles of Hyde Park Corner!

He hurried through the gates between the wardens' lodges toward the clump of hawthorns in which, he judged, the singer was hidden, but when he reached it the little tune was already coming from a lime forty yards away, and soon it was a case of *Adieu, Adieu, the plaintive anthem fades.* The intrepid little visitor to town was returning aquiver to his proper habitat.

However, it had served the purpose of introducing Sir Reginald to that many-acred morgue. Having given up the hunt he found himself in a secluded corner of the place, hemmed in by a dense ring of distasteful yews and, somewhat to his astonishment, glancing into a small stone hut where some coffins could be dimly discerned through a gap at the top of a much rusted iron door.

He approached nearer and found there were six of these boxes resting on two tiers of shelves. Two were full-sized, the other four smaller. This seemed odd. He glanced up and there over the door were engraved the words *The Sepulchre of Jasper Sarasen.*

Quite—but why was it so indecorously open to the eye? He looked around him and there were headstones chipped and broken, some lying on their backs, and a half-dozen other small sheds in varying degrees unclosed to the view. So then he realised what had happened in this place. A bomb had dropped there, probably early in the war just ended, and its effects, though muted by time, were still plain to see. Jasper Sarasen's abode had suffered severely.

It was constructed of limestone with speckled granite panel insets in one side wall. It was about fifteen feet long by nine broad and twelve high. It could never have been a thing of any beauty or distinction. Now the triangular ornament over the door was down in the grass beside it, one of the rather risible angel pinnacles was missing, and bomb splinters had gouged out lumps of stone here and there.

Originally, he noticed, the gap over the door had been filled by a rectangle of dark purple glass, "teeth" of which were still lodged in the stone. Some of the other mausoleums were in even worse shape, and on investigation he found their contents had been removed.

He strolled back to the sepulchre of Jasper Sarasen. For some utterly inexplicable reason he was experiencing a sharp sense of tension and a tiny shiver ran down his flanks. Not only tension but a very odd feeling of curiosity about and interest in this battered little death-shed.

He went right up to it this time and peered in through the gap. Just before he had been contrasting in his mind the wild jocund winging and songs of the birds with the motionless residents in grass and tomb and now, as he looked into

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the sepulchre, a bird flashed out of it and past him and was gone.

What sort of bird? The ornithologist was baffled. It was raven-black and about the size of a starling but its extreme speed of flight was what had startled him. Luckily it had not hit him in the face! It could not have missed him by more than an inch. Yet he had felt no air-stir from its wings.

Could it be nesting in this foetid little cabin? For foetid it certainly was—quite a potent reek, its base just fustiness and mustiness but mingling with that and dominating it was a kind of *sour spiciness*. One noseful was enough and Sir Reginald withdrew his head a bit.

It was fairly dark inside, even on this flaming spring morning, but he could pick out details. Perhaps that *was* the beginning of a nest, that untidy leafy mess on the far cross-beam. Otherwise there were just the six coffins, all of light yellow oak with discolored brass handles. One of them on the top shelf was skewed aside and looked none too secure on its ledge.

Certainly the bomb had done some macabre work and maybe stirred some sleepers in their eternal drowse. There on the floor, which somewhat to his surprise was soaking wet, was a small toy rowing-boat. No doubt some child had pushed it through the aperture. He then turned his attention to the gold-inscribed granite panels on one of the side walls.

They commemorated the following persons—Paula Mary Sarasen, who died on November 19th, 1892, aged thirty-eight, Lucy Elizabeth Sarasen who died on November 19th, 1892, aged sixteen, John Jasper Sarasen who died on November 19th, 1892, aged fourteen. Sir Reginald glanced quickly at the other two panels.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "they all died on the same day!"

And it was so, for that date had also seen the passing of Sarah Margaret, aged ten, and Robert William, aged eight. Railway accident, prehaps, or acute food poisoning—more common in those days—or something.

There was one other puzzle—this was Jasper's sepulchre, but there was no mention of him. The sixth panel was uninscribed. Yet there were six coffins inside—so, presumably, one was his. Of course there might be a hundred explanations of that immeasurably unimportant matter. What affair was it of his!

"And I don't suppose you worry, Jasper," he said in a jocular sotto voce manner. "You're sleeping soundly enough!"

He thought he heard a slight sound coming from inside the hut. Perhaps that odd bird had slipped back. He glanced through the gap once more. No sign of the bird, but he spotted something he had not noticed before—the lid of the askewed coffin was very slightly raised from its box.

He started to saunter back down the path to the entrance. He glanced over his shoulder for a moment and realised what a very isolated

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enclave was occupied by those shattered and neglected little chalets, remote and dispiriting within its barrier of joyless yews even on a morning like this.

What would it be like on a foul November night with an evil gusty wind whining through those melancholy trees and whimpering past those oaken shells? Perhaps, he thought, paradoxically, somehow *less* sinister. The contrast intensified the impression. How that spicy reek stuck in one's gullet!

He spat vigorously several times, something he had not done in a public place since he was an ill-mannered urchin. An elderly female of forbidding aspect passing by gave him a look of extreme revulsion and contempt. He hurried home to his lunch.

Sir Reginald was within two months of his fiftieth birthday and came from a middle-class family with a reputation for intellectualism. He had been true to his line, having taken one of the most unarguable Double-Firsts at Oxford and becoming a distinguished mathematician into the scholastic bargain. He had then spread-eagled all comers in the Civil Service exam and chosen the Treasury.

During the war he had been abroad on various important missions and collected to his reluctant shame a Knighthood of the Order of the British Empire, a Companionship of the Order of the Bath, and a rainbow of foreign orders. He had now returned to his department and taken a service flat in Kensington.

He was a bachelor, presumably confirmed, a near-recluse by temperament. For exercise he fenced with the foil, for amusement went alone to concerts of music. He was tall, slim, perfectly "preserved," and the habitual expression in his face was one of good-natured tolerance and scepticism.

As he walked home, his mind playfully considered the exercise of composing a Greek epitaph in the Elegiac Mode on the family of Sarasen and those others whose rest had been so violently and vulgarly interrupted by low grade high explosive. By the time he reached Redcliffe Court the task was done. Very roughly translated the somewhat flippant couplet went as follows—

"He who so rudely disturbed your repose
Oh strollers in Hades,
Recently joined your brigade,
See that he knows he's in Hell!"

Over lunch he found his mind reverting to the Sarasen menage and what had caused that simultaneous taking off, except for Jasper himself. What had happened to him? Really, he complained to himself irritably, why *am* I worrying about those long-dead worthies, this petty and ancient history? What a waste of time and energy!

Curious how the mind selected, as it were, what one should think about irrespective of what one would choose and prefer. And who was

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one? What a charming piece of metaphysical nonsense! History, Man's composite mind, did the same thing, selecting capriciously what should be recorded on its tablets.

Guy Fawkes, for instance. Sir Reginald's mind went on a meandering stroll through several topics and then returned to the Sarasens. One cause of this was doubtless the very displeasing taste in his mouth. After lunch he gargled zealously without much result.

Indeed the next morning he found himself with a sore throat and a slight feeling of malaise but he did a hard day's work as usual. In the evening after dinner he suddenly felt a strong uncontrollable impulse to go out. As he went through the front door his brain was apparently busy with an office problem, a question of high-level policy. Apparently, because this topic had a competitor.

Sir Reginald was a mighty concentrator and this sensation of, as it were, dual occupation of his mind was quite maddening. In fact he realised that certain kinds of insanity must consist of just such dual sway of the mind, such uncontrollable simultaneous tenure.

His fretful reverie was abruptly interrupted by a bass baritone voice exclaiming, "Sorry, sir, the cemetery's shut. Shuts at eight," and he found himself opposite the entrance gates, which faced him and barred his way. Also facing him and barring his way was a large person in a blue uniform, a cemetery warden.

Sir Reginald smiled. "I just came out for a stroll," said he, "and let my mind take charge. I've no wish to go in there, I assure you. Must be getting old and vague and absent-minded, I suppose."

The man smiled amiably back, "Same with me at times, sir."

"You live in the lodge here?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Yes, sir."

"Comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you, sir. Very cushy job all round."

"That's good," said Sir Reginald and then to his surprise and disgust he said something else, something which a moment before he'd had no intention of saying, something singularly inept and a lie into the bargain. "Oh, by the way, there is a sepulchre belonging to a family named Sarasen over there on the left-hand side of the cemetery. I think it just possible they may have been distant cousins of my father. I don't suppose you know anything about them?"

Could anything have been more inane! As if a cemetery warden, apparently in his early sixties, could possibly be expected to know one of the thousands and thousands of dead under his charge. Dead, in this case, for fifty-four years. Yet oddly enough, the warden looked at him in a slightly startled, wary way and then said slowly, "Well, it's a bit funny you should ask me that, sir. Thank you, sir!"

This last remark was in acknowledgement of a brace of half-crowns which Sir Reginald had slipped into his hand. This was also

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out of character, for Sir Reginald was not in the habit of such riotous tipping, especially in advance of services rendered.

"Yes," continued the warden, "there's a story about that lot—so I don't think they can be any relations of yours, otherwise you'd 'ave 'eard about it, I suppose."

"How did *you* hear about it?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Well, sir, it was like this 'ere. One morning 'bout a year ago, a gent rang my bell and asked me if I could tell him where the Sarasen tomb was, and as I was going along with 'im to show 'im, we got talkin', and 'e told me 'is father 'ad been a well-known lawyer who 'ad defended this Jasper Sarasen when 'e was tried for murder, and got 'im orf, as a matter of fact, and 'e'd 'eard the family was buried 'ere and 'ad come along to 'ave a look for old times sake, if you gets me, sort of sentimental, becos 'e'd 'eard 'is father talk so much about the business, if you understand."

"I quite understand," replied Sir Reginald, looking down at his fingers and coughing and clearing his throat. "Murdering whom?"

"'Is wife and four kids, sir. Took 'em out for a row on the river, it seems. Never let 'em learn to swim. Then 'e tips the boat over and swims ashore 'isself. This gent I'm telling you of said 'is old man was sure Sarasen was guilty, dead to rights. 'E had good reasons to do it, to marry a very rich woman. 'Owsoever they couldn't quite pin it on 'im, and as I said, 'e got away with it.

"But it didn't do 'im much good, it seems, for very soon after 'e was found dead 'isself in 'is 'ouse, though this gent said it was a bit of a mystery what 'e died of. Well, that's what this gent told me, but 'e talked so fast it was 'ard to follow 'im."

"I see," said Sir Reginald slowly. "Nasty little story. And is his the sixth coffin in that sepulchre?"

"Yes, sir, but as you may 'ave noticed, there ain't no tablet up to him. This gent said that was probably because none of 'is relatives 'ad any use for 'im, knowing 'e was a wrong 'un, and wanted no more to do with 'im, so they just shoved 'im in 'is 'ut and left 'im there. That's what 'e surmised anyway.

"This gent said too that this Sarasen was in business in a big way but 'ard up at the time. This gent said 'e was very cunning and sly, a real bad 'un, as wicked as they made 'em. I'm putting it in my own language you understand, sir."

"Oh, well," said Sir Reginald, some shame in his heart, "they obviously weren't the cousins I was thinking of. A strange tale. This place must be full of such queer histories—enough plots buried here to keep all the writers in the world busy for years."

"Yes, sir," agreed the warden. "I'll tell you something, sir, but don't say I told you because I ain't supposed to talk about the job, but when the bomb dropped—I mean the one out in the open there—some of the coffins was blown right to the surface and opened up, and in one there weren't no body at all,

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just some wooden blocks. And in another was a woman without no 'ead, and in another there was something very funny-shaped indeed, not nice to see."

Sir Reginald emitted a not-very-hearty laugh. "Yes," he said, "I can imagine there are some ugly secrets hidden here. Some persons, like the Sarasens, murdered, but not avenged. Unless they *were* avenged," he added vaguely. "Do you ever walk about here after dark? Oh, well, I'm sure that's a very silly question—of course you chaps must be quite hardened to that."

"Not so silly," smiled the warden. "I guarantee this place 'ud give anyone the willies, what you calls the creeps, sir, when there's just a little moon on a winter's night, just enough to make you fancy you can see things, especially in that dark corner where the Sarasens are. To be honest, I don't go down that path more than I can help, not since the bomb dropped, anyway."

"Why?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Dunno, sir, got a feeling about it ever since that bomb dropped. That's all I can say. Could you tell me something, sir," added the warden, rocking slightly on his mighty boots and clasping and unclasping his hands behind his back, "did you ever 'ear of blue lights being seen in cemeteries?"

"Blue lights?" repeated Sir Reginald. "Well, yes, as a matter of fact I did once read of something of the sort happening—in Rome, I fancy. Why? Have you seen anything of the kind?"

"No, sir," replied the warden quickly, "but my mate said something about it once."

Sir Reginald saw that he was not being strictly truthful—for rather obvious reasons. "Well," he said, "I must be getting along. Thank you for a very interesting little talk. I hope we'll have another some day. Good night."

"Good night, sir," said the warden.

*A murderer, eh!,* he thought as he walked home. *Well, Jasper—so you were worthy of your conventionally sinister praenomen! You evil old spider!* He coughed. *Curse this throat!* It did not seem to be getting any better.

Nor was it any better the next morning. Swallowing was beginning to be an ordeal and that cough frequent and harassing. It remained so for the rest of a very busy week. However, it is possible that he would have completely evacuated the Sarasens from his mind and forever had he not been made the victim of a rather sour dream. On the other hand the dream might have been evidence that their affair had already deeply penetrated his subconscious and taken up its abode there.

It was on the Friday night. Suddenly out of the depths of sleep he found himself standing not far from that battered little chalet dimly lit by a dying moon. He was very tense and watchful. He dropped to his hands and knees and crept round to the door and listened. After a moment, he heard a spasmodic creaking sound which he knew was being

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made by the raising of a coffin lid.

Suddenly there was a clatter, a fearful stench filled his nostrils and he heard something moving inside the sepulchre. And then he awoke, his heart banging wildly and sweat bursting out on him, and the trace of that reek in his nose.

This was one of those rare and unrefreshing dreams which do not fade. It remained perfectly and dauntingly vivid in his memory. *Why?*—he irritably and a shade urgently asked himself. There was no rhyme or reason for it, no rational strand of thought linking him to this business. It was only by the purest fluke that he had ever seen that infernal little Death Ark.

The gloomy brood of Sarasens were less than nothing to him. But the human mind, one's own emphatically included, was a cypher to which no key was known. Sporadically it erupted these baffling and apparently causeless enigmas, and one had to make the best of them and laugh them off as well as one could.

He took Saturday morning off. *Now,* he said to himself, *I am going to challenge and defeat this thing, this petty but tiresome obsession.* So, not long after breakfast, with a firm step and stride, he made his way to the cemetery, turned to the left at the cross-paths, passed through the yew curtain, and a quarter of a minute later found himself observing that stark legend, *The Sepulchre of Jasper Sarasen.*

A moment before he had been feeling somewhat self-conscious, aware that he was behaving with some fatuity. Now that feeling went and at once. There was no doubting the displeasing fact that this place "got" him a little. It was "kinetic." What did he mean by that? Well, that it held for him a kind of reluctant fascination. Rather more than "reluctant"—and "fascination" wasn't quite the word—but he could not put his tongue to a better one. That "obsession" was stronger than he had hoped. It was partly, no doubt, its seclusion.

Outside that sable ring were lilacs, hawthorns and laburnums blooming in their hey-day, and tireless wings rustling their boughs. In here was no colour and no bird sang. And in that dismal little stone cave were lying the corpses of six persons, the Slayer and the Slain. The man who had lain with the woman and begotten those children, then mercilessly destroyed them all. All six of them were lying there together night and day, year after year.

And their souls? Sir Reginald was sceptical about souls but on the hypothesis that he was wrong, what about those souls? They might all be lodging there in that repulsive little cabin too. A pleasant family gathering! *Really!* thought Sir Reginald, *what ideas! I seem to have suffered some kind of cenotaphic change into something morbidly responsive to the stir of worms here in this place where all these thousands are repaying their debt to earth, that silent intermingling metabolism.*

The trees rustled nonchalantly

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over them, the birds played amorously but even for those their turn would come. *Well, these are not the thoughts I wish to think. No more cemeteries for me!* And then he said out loud, "But first I'll just have a last peep at you, Jasper." He said it with a nervous facetiousness which disgusted him.

As he cautiously put his face to the opening something ebony-black flashed past his ear. That strange bird again! Jet-propelled, apparently! he told himself. That odd stink again too! No good enquiring into *its* origin. And there were those six sleepers, if they slept. Which was Jasper? Well, which *was* he? Certainly one of the two full-sized coffins on the top shelf with the slightly raised lid.

"Is that you, Jasper?" he muttered. Why couldn't he control that fatuous babbling! That was odd! The gap between the lid and case was certainly wider than it had been the first time, and as he asked that puerile question it seemed to him as if something had fluttered across that gap. An illusion due, no doubt, to the fact that the sun had just at that moment swung from behind a cloud.

He tried to change the subject of his thoughts. How absurd that the dead should have the right to clutter up the earth like this! Those six bundles of corruption were taking up quite a sizeable piece of London. Burnt and their ashes scattered, they would have gone sweetly and cleanly back to their elements—even Jasper's! How much better than that the baleful old assassin should rot away there with his victims round him. Sir Reginald could not get the sardonic conception out of his mind.

*Now that's enough,* he told himself. *I'll come here no more. It's becoming a foolish nuisance. Perhaps as men grow older, especially rather lonely men, they become subject to such follies at times. They have to be fought. Now I've seen all there is to see and that is precious little. I'm in no way concerned with this tragic little group. No more cemeteries or sepulchral speculations for me! No more trafficking mentally with the dead!* Firm, resolute, uncompromising words, yet somehow not bringing confidence and certainty with them.

He walked off and then, when he reached the fence of yews, glanced back. His gaze became fixed and his brow furrowed. He turned right around and still stared as though much puzzled. He seemed to be hesitating but with an effort turned around again and walked quickly back to the entrance gates. Of course his eyes must have deceived him!

On the way out he passed his friend, the warden, who enquired after his health. He replied that his throat was giving him some trouble.

"You sound a bit 'oarse, sir," said the warden. "You ain't been putting your 'ead into any of them tombs, 'ave you?"

"Why?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Well, it ain't considered 'ealthy, so my doc says. 'E thinks they should all be emptied and pulled down."

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"I'll remember that," said Sir Reginald with a faint smile, "but I don't think I'll be coming here again."

"Don't blame you!" said the man in blue. "It ain't exactly a Fun Fair!"

As he walked back to his flat Sir Reginald wondered if there could be anything in the doctor's contention. It was a depressing possibility, especially as his throat was really painful and clearly not yielding to home treatment. In fact it had got very much worse during the last hour. He would see a doctor himself on Monday, he decided, if it was not a great deal better.

He managed to swallow a little lunch and then went to lie down on the sofa in his sitting-room. To his intense irritation he found his mind again and again reverting to that accursed Sarasen shed. If he had been feeling fit enough he would have gone to the Athenaeum Club, membership of which was his sole concession to sociability, but his temperature was rising and he became slightly lightheaded, sufficiently so to permit the entry of distasteful fantasies.

When he fell into an uneasy doze, there he was at once in the vicinity of that hut, prey to a fearful urgent curiosity as to what was happening inside it. For that something was happening he felt horribly sure. He would crouch on his hands and knees like a beast and put his ear to the stone. And then, with an effort, drag his mind back to sanity and coherence.

But the moment he relaxed his guard, there he was back again at that reeking little shed. Once he found himself peeping slyly in, the stench strong in his throat. Out flew the foul bird on lightning wings. And there was that ochre coffin with its raised lid—its rising lid!

With a stifled cry he sprang from his couch. It was really rather beastly, undermining, ghostly, necrophilic, inexplicable. Inexplicable, because as he told himself for the hundredth time he was in no way connected with this malign set. There was no tie or bond of any sort between them. Why then— *why?* It was as if he had carelessly, unwittingly strayed within the ambit of some potent vicious instrument for evil.

The concept was not entirely new to him. Sir Reginald, like so many baffled and disillusioned persons of our time when confronted inexorably and bloodily with the human dilemma, had played—the word is apt—with the concept of diabolism. One looks in the glass and sees a tolerably humane honest peaceful member of a constructive society. One glances out the window and sees a howling mob, rifles at the ready, bombs at the belt. Unless one is very lucky, one only too soon sees oneself stamping and shouting in the crazed and suicidal ranks.

Was it possible that men left to themselves were good, in the sense that they were sane, social and capable of ameliorating their lot, however slowly, but that they were forever thwarted and opposed and

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partially overcome by the powers of cosmic evil? That God was the Devil?

He began to feel intolerably restless and in great mental distress. He could not bear to be alone in this room a moment longer. Ill though he was, he must go out. He got his hat and stick and walked slowly along, dizzy with fever and not far from delirium.

Presently he found himself entering the cemetery and walking vaguely and unsteadily down the main avenue. The few persons he passed glanced at him casually and then more sharply. They looked back at him over their shoulders. "Been drinking," was their verdict.

"Why am I here?" he asked himself. "Why am I here?" He plodded painfully on, turned to the left, passed through the barrier of yews, reached the sepulchre of Jasper Sarasen. Then he could go no further and flung himself down on the long grass which faced the tomb.

After a while the bells rang for closing-time—the dark came slowly down and the thin curve of the new moon lifted over the horizon. It was death-quiet save for the distant muted murmur of the traffic. Sometime later Sir Reginald stirred from his fever sleep and, his eyes wide and staring, began crawling like a beast toward the sepulchre.

He slunk across the path and, breathing convulsively, reached the stone against which he put his ear. For a moment he heard nothing and then there came a small sharp *creak*, then another and something clattered down within the tomb. He crawled round to the entrance and jerkily, gaspingly, raised himself till his eyes were on a level with the opening . . .

He found himself staring straight into something which had the ghastly semblance of a face, livid with patches of corrupted skin, eyes glazed yet fiery, deep sunken in their sockets and foul matted hair drooping past its fleshless chin. The iron door began slowly opening.

He staggered to his feet and began running in wild terror; and something, he knew, was running just behind him on silent foot. Thin blue flames sprang up around him, a dark bird hurled itself again and again into his face. And then he could go no farther. Something touched him on the neck, he screamed twice, and fell.

The cemetery warden leapt from his bed, threw his overcoat on and ran toward those screams. He saw a movement in the grass and dashed toward it. Sir Reginald was lying on his back and thrusting, thrusting desperately with his arms. His eyes were vilely wide and pupil-less. His breath came in great convulsive gasps. He raised himself once, fell back and ceased to breathe.

A thin blue flame coiled out from under him, ran up to his breast and shone there, straight and unflickering like a flower. The warden cried out, ripped off his coat and beat at the flame in a crazy way, again and again, crying out all the while.

And when others came running, that is how they found them.

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# the broken record

*by .... James MacGregor*

**Mars is fairyland. But vacationers from Earth would be wise to remember magic can be potent stuff.**

STOUT CORTEZ and all his men, looking at each other with a wild surmise—silent, upon a peak in Darien—weren't half as wild as the first man who landed on Mars and had a good look at the natives. In fact, the discovery of the Pacific was a small thing in comparison with that first sight of the Martians.

Those Earthmen (more specifically, two Americans, a Scot and a Spanish-American Pole of Russian extraction) would not have been surprised if the Martians were utterly inhuman, and they would not have been really surprised if they were human.

But it was obvious that someone was playing a joke on them when they saw the Martians were something like fairies.

Later scientists, having to say something, postulated an earlier connection between Martians and Terrans that explained the persistence of fairies, gnomes, goblins and dwarfs in Terran legend. They tore up most of the books on anthropology and suggested that the human race started on Mars, had to shift, went to Earth and evolved there, leaving a few behind, who didn't have to evolve.

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*Another exciting story from England to grace the pages of this magazine. It is beginning to look very much as if American science fictioneers would do well to look to their laurels in the face of this developing competition. However, we have a bone to pick with the late John Keats—for it was Keats who put "stout Cortez" instead of Balboa, silent upon that peak in Darien and thereby fouled up American history, apparently for keeps. For which, we say, a pox upon his immortal soul . . .*



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That has very little to do with David and Dorothy Barnes. This was long after space-travel had become commonplace. The two Americans, the Scot and the Spanish-American Pole of Russian extraction were all dead, alas, and it had become clear that if the Martians were a practical joke, it was being carried far past the time for the belly-laughs and the knee-slapping.

Oddly enough, though they had had a space-car for years, David and Dorothy had never been to Mars. It was one of the things to which they had never got around.

I

"Well, with only a week left, we ought to be further than just *talking*, dear," said Dorothy.

"All right," said David.

"You've got to have things *arranged*, darling, or you waste so much time. And you've only three weeks. My idea was, now we have the cruiser, we might go to Mars and just camp out there, like pioneers. It's . . ."

"All right," said David again. In the end he usually left things like this to Dorothy. But she didn't seem to realize there was no argument and still tried hard to convince him.

"It's lovely, they tell me. But you don't have to believe me. Read about it in the book. Here." She handed him the guide, open at the place, and stood back demurely, her hands clasped behind her, like a child waiting to be congratulated. David looked at the book. Everything that had ever been said about Mars, before anyone went there, was quite wrong. Mars wasn't a frozen world, it was a world with the climate of California—because of the ether current, said the book triumphantly (a sort of interplanetary Gulf Stream).

There were pictures of friendly landscapes, like North Canada in summer. They couldn't keep on going to Venus every year. "It might be worse," remarked David grudgingly.

"Oh, David, I knew you'd like it," said Dorothy gratefully. "Then we'll go to Mars after all?"

David, by this time, was set on going to Mars. The fishing, the book said, was wonderful. "If you want to go," he said, "I suppose I can stand it."

For a while Dorothy was rapturous. Then she got down to business about it.

"We can take six altogether," she said thoughtfully, "and what I thought was—let's make it a *young* party. Everyone between eighteen and twenty-five. There's John Morgan and Nancy Rotar . . ."

David surveyed her with amusement as she talked. She was twenty-eight. What exactly was the psychology behind her eighteen to twenty-five line-up? Did it mean just that that would make her twenty-five—or better still, twenty-one? Or was she going to be everybody's mother, the woman of the world, not old—heavens, no—but more experienced than her guests, able to look after them and be kind and understanding?

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Dorothy had been fascinating and beautiful when he married her seven years ago, and since she wouldn't change noticeably for nearly forty years, she probably still was. So the change, David thought, must be in him. She was still something to be proud of, something to show off and have other men envy, and he was of course very fond of her, but . . .

"What was that?" he said absent-mindedly.

"I said Jacky Greene, dear," Dorothy repeated. "She would complete the party. You always avoid her, but she's quite a nice girl."

"Oh, ask her if you like," said David carelessly. "I leave things like that to you."

II

John was at the manual controls as the cruiser swung over the planet in a long arc for a landing. He was the typical big, lazy, good-natured college boy. He had left college, but he would always slouch lazily about, when he could, in that yellow sweater with the big F in purple silk back and front. He would always have that thick unruly hair standing up like untrimmed gorse, even when it was white instead of sandy. He would always have perfect teeth and smile that slow, easy smile that seemed to spread from his face over his whole body.

Not everyone had a big space-cruiser that was more comfortable than most houses. Most people who owned one were like children with expensive toys, spending most of every flight at the controls and watching jealously when anyone else was trying the feel of the ship. Not so David. He liked his turn at the controls and he could handle the ship competently enough, but when someone else was willing and able to take over a tricky landing David was happy to stand back and let him do it. John was handling the cruiser beautifully.

"Shouldn't we drop a little, John?" asked Dorothy anxiously. Even in a space-cruiser she was a back-seat driver.

"John knows what he's doing, honey," said David easily. "He's saving about two hundred dollars' worth of fuel by landing on gravity and air resistance. A liner pilot couldn't do it better."

John smiled slowly, happily, at the compliment.

"But why land in the dark?" asked Jacky. She was twenty-two, a blond Grade-A home-wrecker. She and Dorothy were both wearing slacks. In Dorothy's case it was a mistake. But Jacky never made mistakes with clothes. She wore fawn creased slacks just to show she could do it, David thought, and that Dorothy couldn't.

"We're not landing in the dark," said David patiently. "We're in an upward curve that will lift us again in the twilight zone. Then we'll drop gently where it's still day. We'll have an hour or two to get settled before it's dark."

They landed as neatly as anyone could wish, in a beautiful valley that had all the variety of Earth's finest landscapes. To the north and

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west were uplands, rising slowly almost from the spot where they touched down. To the east was a thick forest split by a blue lake, with a thin mist over it where four streams met. To the south the valley stretched away, bisected by one of the streams, to distant red-and-grey mountains.

"The edge of the forest will be perfect for our camp," said Dorothy. "Look—nobody here! Isn't that lovely? Have we time to put up the tents before it's dark?"

"Not tonight," said David decidedly. "Tonight we sleep in the cruiser."

"Oh, all right. But we must at least have a look round. I want to see the fairies. But perhaps the fairies go where the people are, near all the big camps and holiday towns——"

"Then we can do without the fairies," said David. It was a world as friendly as the guide-book said, with a tropical temperature, no insects, and air like wine.

III

The sun was directly overhead, and Jacky was testing a heavy Earth tan against its burning rays.

"You're sure Dorothy won't go into your tent?" David asked.

"To her it's a crime to disturb anyone's sleep," said Jacky. "She won't disturb me and she'll see nobody else does. I can slip back when they're busy with lunch."

They were a mile from the camp, lying in the hollow top of a little hill. Jacky had thrown her white skirt on the hot grass and was sunbathing in a silf swimsuit which seemed alive as it analysed the sunlight like a prism. Now it was green shot with yellows and blues—now white with purple, luminous shadows—now crimson with grey and orange dancing across it—always glossy, always in contrast with her golden-brown skin, for brown had been cut out of its range for just that purpose.

"And anyway," she went on, "even if she does notice anything here it will pass as a holiday affair. She couldn't have suspected anything or she wouldn't have asked me."

"But we'd have to be much more careful afterwards."

"We can't really be much more careful than we've been up to now. Does Dorothy . . . I mean, does she go her own way too? I've never heard anything."

It wasn't necessary for her to explain the meaning of the phrase "go her own way." "I don't think so," said David uncomfortably. "I think I'd feel better if she did."

"Wouldn't you mind?"

"I don't know. The question never arose."

They lay silent for a while, David still watching the play of light on Jacky's silf outfit. Theoretically, if she stayed absolutely still and the light didn't vary, the same colour-scheme should persist. He had seen it in fashion showroom displays. But though she was relaxed on the grass, she could never be motionless enough to capture and keep one hue. Her slow breathing kept her

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halter flashing through the colors and the minute rippling of her diaphragm was imparted to the trunks at her waist and drew them inexorably through the colors of the rainbow and more.

"Look," said Jacky suddenly, excitedly, but David was intent on the incredible change of hue at her slight movement. "There are fairies around here after all."

He whirled then, and for a moment could see nothing in the bright sunlight. Then he saw the fairy shapes.

They were just under four feet tall. Their legs were long and slim, their bodies light and elfin, their chins pointed. There were about a dozen of them, and they were dancing.

David jumped to his feet.

"Oh, don't move," Jacky exclaimed. "They run away when you go near them. No one's ever caught one of them."

"I'm not trying to catch them," said David. "I just want to have a good look at them. Elusive little creatures."

The fairies—there was nothing else to call them, they looked so like the illustrations in children's books—didn't let him come too close. When he was about a hundred yards from them they danced away. They were in a sort of ring, paying no attention to him or Jacky, but when he approached they drifted away, and when he stopped, they stopped. They were throwing a pink crystal to each other like a medicine ball. But the crystal wasn't heavy. It floated slowly in the air like a balloon.

David ran as fast as he could towards them, but they kept their distance easily. Then suddenly he stopped, wondering if they were trying to lead him away from Jacky. Fairy stories of lost princesses came to his mind. He went back. The fairies promptly returned to where they had first seen them.

"They don't want to be friends," he told Jacky.

But she was thinking of something else. "We'll have to tell the others about them," she said, "if they haven't seen them already. That's awkward."

"No," said David. "You slip back and then I'll come into camp alone. I don't have to say you were with me up here."

"All right." She rose in a sudden riot of color, so dazzling in motion that David looked away, or at her face or arms or long brown legs, anywhere but at the seething, shining whirlpool of color. Then she fastened her skirt about her waist and hurried off in the direction of the camp.

The fairies ignored her. They went on with their inscrutable game with the pink crystal.

## IV

John and David were fishing. "David," said John reflectively, "do you think you're treating Dorothy quite right?"

David caught his breath, but tried to say casually, "What do you mean by that remark?"

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"You know what I mean. You know if you were really forced into it, you'd never actually prefer Jacky to Dorothy. Maybe it's none of my business, but . . ."

"You're right," said David coldly.

"Oh, well. Just thought I'd mention it. I thought perhaps you hadn't really considered it seriously. I mean, sooner or later you'll have to choose between them. And of course you'll choose Dorothy, because you're not a fool. But maybe it will be too late then—and anyway, it will never be quite the same."

David searched wildly for something to say. He found it. "Look," he exclaimed. "There they are."

On the other side of the lake the fairies were dancing again and playing their game with the crystal.

"Why, you're right," John exclaimed. "They *are* fairies."

He rose to go to them, round the lake.

"It's no use," David told him. "They won't let you come near them."

"Then let's go back. See if they come nearer us. Maybe they'll swim across."

They moved back a few yards. None of the fairies seemed to be looking at them but they closed the gap. The two men goggled at them.

"They're dancing *on* the water!" David exclaimed.

They could see the ripples where the little feet touched. The fairies sank into the water a little, but that was all.

"That can't be all they displace," murmured David. "Besides, how do they balance? They've no wings . . ."

"They must be a different form of matter," said John. "Water is quite solid to them."

"Another thing—That's a strange game they're playing. Do you see, when one of them catches the crystal, he wavers. Sort of disappears for a moment. It does something to him, catching it. I don't see what it is."

"Let's go back to the camp," said John. "Maybe they'll follow us and the others can see them."

They started back. The fairies, still paying no attention to them, drifted after them.

## V

It was night, but not dark. Mars had two moons, and there was no two-hundred-mile blanket of air to cut off the light of the stars. They made a vast lacy tracery of fairy lights.

"Nobody will go near my tent," said Jacky, "but are you sure Dorothy won't know you're gone?"

"I told her I'd a slight temperature and would sleep on the ship," said David. "She's desperately afraid of catching anything. She'll worry about me, but she'll leave me alone."

They were in a little clearing in the forest, fully two miles from the camp. They had run together through the night, laughing, but softly, for in the stillness sounds carried easily.

"So we're all right," said Jacky.

"John Morgan knows," said David.

"Him?" Jacky stared at him. "Will he talk?"

"He'll never say a word to

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Dorothy. Whatever happens. He spoke to me, and he may talk to you, but he won't bring Dorothy into it."

"Oh."

Even the night on Mars was tropical. They both wore only shirts and shorts, and were warm. The ether current, David thought wisely.

He caught Jacky by the shoulders and looked into eyes that were grey in the strong, warm light. Gradually she moved against him. The hot night became perceptibly hotter. It was one of those moments at which time chastely stood still. David heard a sound and ignored it—heard it again and whirled round, letting Jacky free.

It was the fairies again. They were dancing at their usual distance. David heard the faint twittering he had heard twice before.

He cursed. "Never mind them," said Jacky impatiently. "They never bother us. They never bother anyone who comes here."

Insanely David ran at them, trying to drive them off. They melted away, but when he returned to Jacky they were back. Her shirt and her light shorts gleamed in the dusk while the rest of her merged with the shadows behind.

"Look out," screamed Jacky as he reached her. "They're throwing something."

He turned and saw the pink crystal sailing towards them.

"It can't hurt us," he said. "I can catch it, the way they do."

"Leave it alone!" Jacky exclaimed. "It might be dangerous if it's not handled gently. But I'll be careful."

He stood below it as it dropped and caught it gently and easily in both hands.

## III

The sun was directly overhead, and Jacky was testing a heavy Earth tan against its burning rays.

"You're sure Dorothy won't go into your tent?" David asked.

"To her it's a crime to disturb anyone's sleep," said Jacky. "She won't disturb me, and she'll see no one else does. I can slip back when they're busy with lunch."

They were a mile from the camp, lying in the hollow top of a little hill. Jacky had thrown her white skirt on the hot grass and was sunbathing in a silf swimsuit.

Was silf such a good idea, David wondered? It was always so much more beautiful than the girl who wore it. No one could compete with that flashing, dazzling riot of color. Not even Jacky.

"The trouble with sunbathing," he said lazily, "is that you're too hot to kiss."

"What a thing to say to a girl!" she exclaimed, laughing. "Anyway, you're just as hot."

"It's not so bad when you don't move."

They lay in silence for a long time, David content to shut his eyes and let his mind wander.

"Look," said Jacky suddenly. "There are fairies around here after all."

"I'm not surprised," he retorted, not opening his eyes. "They tell you there are pyramids in Egypt, and

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when you go there, lo and behold, there they are."

"*Look,* David," said Jacky.

He looked. They were dancing and throwing a pink crystal to each other. It looked like a huge pink diamond, except that no diamond floated in the air like that.

"Aren't you going to do anything?" asked Jacky.

"What—try to talk to them? They'd only run away."

"We'll have to tell the others about them, if they haven't seen them already. That's awkward."

"No," said David, wondering why she didn't see the obvious. "You slip back and then I'll come into camp alone."

"All right." She rose and picked up her skirt, but David was watching the fairies curiously, puzzled.

## IV

"David," said John reflectively as they were fishing.

"No," interrupted David, "I don't."

"Eh?"

"You were going to talk to me about Jacky, and ask whether I thought I was treating Dorothy right. Well, I don't. But that's all there is to it. Keep out of it. It'll work out all right."

"So long as you're thinking about it," said John coolly. "I thought you weren't. You're not a bad chap, David. Not the sort to give your wife a raw deal. Not unless you were determined not to see that that was what you were doing."

"I know what I'm doing."

There was silence for a moment, then—"Are those the fairies you were talking about?" asked John.

"That's them. Don't look so interested. They're just like children trying to get attention. Ignore them, and we may find out more about them." He yawned. "If it matters," he added indifferently.

## V

It was night, but not dark. Mars had two moons . . .

"Nobody will disturb me," said Jacky, "but what about you?"

"I told Dorothy I had a temperature," said David. "She thinks I'm sleeping on the ship."

There was a period of awkwardness. They knew why they were there, each knew the other knew, knew the other knew that he knew, *ad infinitum.* It was enough to make anyone nervous, and feel a little foolish about it.

David caught Jacky by the shoulders, feeling as if fifty cameras were on them. Jacky didn't do anything. Rebelling against the obviousness of it all, David seized her suddenly and crushed her against him as if they had only a few seconds of life left.

And as he had almost known would happen, he heard the twittering. He didn't need to turn.

"I'm not making love in public," he said furiously.

"Never mind them," said Jacky, just as angrily.

David ran at them savagely, skimming the ground like a deer, in a wild effort to touch them just once. But it was hopeless. He

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stumbled back to Jacky. It was darker and her white shirt and shorts picked her out against the shadows.

"Look out," said Jacky, but without excitement. "They're throwing something."

"Let them."

He didn't look round, but just for an instant he felt a light touch on his shoulder.

III

The sun was directly overhead.

"Sure Dorothy won't go into your tent?" asked David.

"Quite," said Jacky briefly.

She was sunbathing in a silf swimsuit. It was a mistake, David thought. She was just a girl, after all, and he had seen millions of girls. Why should anyone look at tanned flesh, just like any other tanned flesh, with that color-symphony going on? And why even look at the color-symphony, for that matter?

There was nothing to say. David had a feeling it had all been said before—and not only by him, but by every married man playing around with another girl. They just lay and frizzled in the sun.

"Look," said Jacky suddenly.

"I know. The fairies."

"How do you know? We've never seen them."

"Probably saw them looking into the tent in my sleep. Then forgot about it."

"They've got a bigger crystal this time," said Jacky absently. "Bigger and blue."

"Now *you're* at it," remarked David. "When have you seen them with a crystal before?"

"I don't know. I just thought it would be smaller and pink. I've no idea why."

She didn't suggest trying to communicate with the fairies. She knew it would be no use, too. She didn't think it awkward that they should have seen the fairies for the first time when they were together. She knew what to do.

IV

"David," said John reflectively as they were fishing. Then he smiled crookedly. "No, I don't have to say it, do I? You know what I mean."

"Yes, I know," said David. "I won't say it's none of your business, because maybe in a way it is. But I don't think you have to worry about it."

"No. You wouldn't go wrong for long, David. But I thought maybe you'd need a little—reminder."

"Maybe I did," David admitted. "Come away before those damned fairies frighten all the fish away by dancing on the water."

V

It was night, but not dark.

"Nobody will disturb me," said Jacky, "but what about you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm beginning to wonder if anything matters."

"One thing always does." She said the word softly. "Love."

"Love?" exclaimed David. "What's that?"

His arms were on her shoulders. Perhaps she had put them there—

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but really, she didn't seem much more interested in the whole business than he was. They were, in a sense, playing out time.

He caught her and crushed her against him in an honest endeavour to break her ribs.

Behind him there was a light twittering.

"Of course," he said dully. He didn't look at the fairies. He tried to lull them into a belief that he didn't know they were there. Then he suddenly leapt backwards, twisting in the air, and was running when his feet touched the ground.

It didn't make the least difference. He recognized the fact, gave up the chase, and returned to Jacky. He hardly needed the gleam of her light clothes to know where she would be.

"I think," she said tiredly as he came up to her, "they're throwing something."

He grabbed her wildly and ran, not looking behind him, taking a curving course. He felt something strike his shoulder just the same.

I

". . . further than just talking, dear," said Dorothy.

"All right," said David.

"You've got to have things *arranged,* darling, or you waste so much time. And you've only three weeks. Now my idea was, now we have the cruiser, we might go to Mars and camp out, like pioneers."

"Mars?" said David. "I've heard of the place."

"It's lovely, they tell me. Venus is quite *passé* now. Everyone goes to Mars. Once, anyway——"

"Then there's something wrong with it," said David flatly, "and we'll go somewhere else."

"But . . ."

"Dorothy, it isn't often I put my foot down, but it's down now. We're not going to Mars. Is that perfectly clear?"

"All right, dear," said Dorothy with her usual docility. "We'll just go to Venus, like last year."

"At least we know what to expect there."

"That's true, dear. We can take six altogether . . ."

David didn't listen. Dorothy had been fascinating and beautiful when he married her seven years ago. But not every husband, he thought proudly, could say his wife seemed to grow more fascinating and beautiful as time went by. He could.

"What was that?" he said absently.

"I said Jacky Greene, dear," Dorothy repeated. "She would complete the party."

"Dorothy," said David quietly, "I nearly always do what you say, don't I? But I might as well tell you here and now"—his voice rose—"that if you ask that little bitch I'm staying right here at home!"

"Very well, darling," said Dorothy docilely. "I know you always avoid her, but she's really a nice girl."

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# the questing of foster adams

*by . . . Clifford D. Simak*

**What was the creature evoked by the recluse on the hill? Was it a goat or something worse by far?**

THERE CAN BE no denial that the hobby of Foster Adams was a strange one. One must bear in mind that Foster Adams was a strange man. Whether Adams, himself, considered his research as a hobby or an occupation no one can ever say. It may have been a hobby or an obsession—or it may have been no more than the misdirection of a brilliant mind.

How he had come to take up his research, what deep-laid motive drove him to carry it out to its logical and deadly conclusion, I have no idea. Come to think of it, there is very little that I do know of Foster Adams. There is very little anyone knows.

I do not know where he was born nor who his parents were nor what became of them, although I always took it for granted they had died many years ago. I know nothing of his education except that it must have been extensive. I have no knowledge as to how or when or why he came into possession of the old Smith farm. Nor why he sought an answer to a question to which no man of this day and age would give more than passing notice, although there was a time not too many centuries removed when men must

*In the past fifteen years the name of Clifford D. Simak has come to be virtually synonymous, in science fiction circles, with the long galactic story that concerns itself with people and issues and heavy pseudo-science that sweep universes before them. However, Mr. Simak is a man of many facets. He is also the managing editor of the* Minneapolis Star *and master of the brief fantasy, which last he reveals here.*



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have spent much thought upon the matter.

That some deep compelling motive lay within his mind there can be no doubt. Certainly toward the end, when he had reason to believe the solution he sought might be within his grasp, he must have realized the danger of such knowledge.

Perhaps Foster Adams counted himself of stouter fiber than he really was or it may have been that in his most considered judgment, or even in his wildest imaginings, he never once came close to guessing what the answer really was. And this would seem most strange, for his questing was bolstered by many years of study.

I first heard of Foster Adams from an acquaintance in the history department at State University.

"Foster Adams is your man," he told me. "He lives down in your part of the country now. He probably has more historic insignificance packed inside his skull than any other living person."

It seemed strange to me, and I said so, that a professor of English history could not tell me about the eating habits of the English middle class in the fifteenth century but he shook his head.

"I can tell you in a general way," he said, "but not down to the last crumb of barley bread as Foster Adams can."

When I asked who Adams was he couldn't tell me. He was not connected with any university, he had never published anything and he was not an authority, not a recognized authority, at any rate. But he did know what people had worn and eaten from Egypt down to the last century's turn—what tools they had used, what crops they raised, how they traveled—all the little trivial things that went to make up daily living down through the centuries.

"It's a hobby," my acquaintance said. And that's as close an explanation as I ever got from anyone.

The Smith farm is a stark weather-beaten place set upon a wind-scarred rocky ridge. It has no grace or character and no dignity. Notwithstanding what happened there of a late November night it even now fails to achieve a patina of terror or the somber greatness of dark happenings.

I still recall my first sight of it and the depression and melancholy that gripped me as I drove up the rocky road, winding up the hill to reach the ridge.

The house was grey, not with the greyness of old lumber, but with the flat, unhealthy grey of lumber that has known a coat of paint which long since has scaled and pealed and been dissolved in wind and weather. The barn's ridgepole sagged in the middle, for all the world like a swaybacked horse, and another building, which may have been a hoghouse, had fallen completely in upon itself. Seeing it for the first time I had the distinct impression that it had grown tired one day and simply given up.

At one time there had been an extensive orchard back of the house

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but now there were only ghosts of trees, strange humped things that stood in the sun like gnarled old men. A windmill sporting a buckled tower stood with bowed head above the dying orchard and the wind that never ceased to blow across the ridge flapped the great metal vane back and forth in a futile and nerve-grating monotony.

As I stopped the car I saw that the ravages of neglect reached even to the smallest item. Flower-beds struggled with encroaching weeds. The sloping doors that covered the outside stairway to the cellar were half rotted away and part of them had fallen in.

A shutter hung canted at one window, at another both shutters were missing and I saw where they had fallen to the ground, with grass and weeds growing through the interstices. The porch sagged, its posts canted dangerously, and the floor creaked and shifted underneath my feet as I walked to the door.

An old man, wearing a uniform so ancient that its black was turning green, opened the door in answer to my knock and never in my life have I seen a sight so incongruous. For this was an old worn-out Wisconsin farm and the man who stood in the door was straight out of Dickens.

I asked for Adams and the man held the door a little wide and asked me to come in. His voice croaked harshly and sent echoes sounding through the old high-ceilinged rooms.

The house was almost bare of furniture. There was a woodstove in the kitchen and a few old chairs and a table covered with a piece of greasy oilcloth. In what had been the wainscoated dining-room packing boxes were lined against the wall and stacks of books were piled here and there, apparently at random. The windows gaped upon the world with empty eyes, without a curtain to their name.

In the front parlor green window-shades were drawn and the room was dark with a darkness that was deeper than the dusk.

Foster Adams heaved his bulky body from a leather chair standing in one corner and came across the room to shake my hand. His hand-clasp was cold and flabby, indifferent if not bored.

"Not many find their way here," he said. "I am glad you came."

But I am sure he wasn't. I am sure he wished I hadn't bothered him by coming.

We sat there in the dusk behind the drawn shades and we talked in hushed voices, for the very room whispered not to speak aloud. Foster Adams, if no more could be said for him, had perfect manners. Prim, precise, even a little fussy—and disquieting.

It was queer, I thought, to hear the thin, high, cold and hostile whining of the wind at August noon against the sides and around the corners of the house. For there was no friendliness in hill or house. Whatever warmth they may have held had been leached away with the ruin of the acres and the callous

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abandonment of the buildings to wind and rain and sun.

Yes, Adams said, he could tell me the things I wished to know. And he told them to me without recourse to note or book, speaking as if he were drawing upon personal observation, as if he were talking of a time that was contemporaneous, as if he himself had lived in fifteenth-century England.

"Such things," he said, "have always interested me. What kind of petticoats a woman wore or the kind of herbs that went into the pot. And even more"—he lowered his voice a trifle—"even more, the way that men have died."

He sat motionless in his chair and it was as if he might be listening for something that he knew was there—rats in the cellar, perhaps or crickets in the drapes.

"Men," he stated, "have died in many ways." He made it sound as if he were the first man who had ever thought or said it.

In the silence I heard the clumping tread of the old manservant walking about in the dining-room just outside the door. Faintly from the orchard came the muted metallic thumping of the wind-tossed windmill vane.

Foster Adams rose abruptly from his chair. "It was nice seeing you," he said. "I hope you come again."

And that is exactly how it was. I was literally thrown out, told to go like a gawping schoolboy who has overstayed his welcome.

But I couldn't get the man out of my mind. There was a fascination about him that kept tugging at me to go back to the old grey farmhouse atop the bleak unfriendly ridge. Like a man who keeps going back to a certain cage in a zoo, to stand and stare and shiver at the sight of the beast it houses.

I finished my book, using Adams' information to good advantage, and sent it off to the publisher.

Then, one day, scarcely knowing what I was doing, never for a moment admitting to myself that I was doing it, I found myself once more among the tangled hills of the lower Wisconsin.

The old farmhouse looked just the same as it had before.

I had told myself that probably Adams had just moved in shortly before my visit and that, given time, he would fix up the place. A coat of paint most certainly would have helped. A fireplace would have done wonders to bring some cheer into the house. Flowers and rock gardens and some terracing would have given its gaunt lines a softer setting, while a poplar or two at the corners would have broken the stark dreariness that reared against the sky.

But Adams had done nothing. The house was just the way I remembered it.

He said that he was glad to see me but his handshake was still a flabby gesture and he was as prim and straight as ever.

He sat in his deep leather chair and talked and I knew that if he were glad to see me it was only because it gave him a chance to hear his own voice. For he didn't talk to

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me, he didn't even look at me. It was as if he were talking to himself and there were times when I caught a querulousness in his voice as though he were arguing with himself.

"There is a streak of cruelty," he said, "that runs through the human race. You find it everywhere you look, on every page of recorded history. Man is not satisfied with inflicting death alone, he must inflict it with many painful frills.

"A boy pulls the wings off flies and ties tin cans to a dog's tail. The Assyrians flayed screaming thousands while they were still alive."

There was a feeling of mustiness in the house—a feeling, not a smell. A sense of dusty time that had long since run through the glass.

"The Aztecs," said Foster Adams, "cut out the hearts of their living sacrifices with a blunt stone knife. The Saxons threw men into the serpent pits or flayed them living and rubbed salt into the quivering flesh as the pelt peeled off."

The talk sickened me—not the things he told me but the way he talked of them, the smooth professional talk of a man who knows his subject and views it objectively as something to be probed and studied and catalogued as neatly as a merchant would invoice his stock.

For to him, I realize now, the flayed men and the men in the serpent pits and the men who hung on crosses along the Roman roads were not flesh and blood but certain facts that someday might fall into a pattern under the persistent probing of his mind.

Not that he was callous. His interest was real and alive and personal—that his interest became acutely personal in his last few hours of sanity and life there can be small doubt.

He must have seen that his monologue disturbed me for he suddenly changed the subject and we talked of other things, of the country and the view from the hill, of the pleasant weather, for it was late October, and of the irritating curiosity of the natives concerning his reason for living at the farm and what he might be doing. I could see that he was disturbed by their actions.

More than a year elapsed before I saw Foster Adams again and then only by accidental circumstance.

Driving home from a brief visit to Chicago, a violent autumn storm caught me on the road just as night was lowering. Rain turned into ice, ice to snow. As the storm grew worse and the car was reduced to a mere crawl I realized that I could not continue much further and must soon seek shelter. And with this realization came another, that I was at that moment no more than two miles or so from the old Smith farm.

I found the side road that turned off the main highway and half an hour later came to the foot of the hill that ran to the ridge above. Knowing the car had no chance to make the slope I got out and walked, floundering in the wet and heavy snow, guided by a feeble beam of

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light from one of the farmhouse windows.

By daylight the wind on the hill had been merely vicious, a thin-flanked wind with a snarl between its teeth. Now it was filled with a terrible anger as it howled across the ridge and went booming down into the hollow.

Pausing to get my breath, I listened to it and heard the howling of a pack of hellish hounds, the screams of hunted harried victims, the slow wet whimpering gurgle of a cornered creature that floundered in a deep ravine.

I hurried on, ridden by senseless terror, and it was not until I was almost at the house that I realized I was running, driven by the throng of imagined horrors that pressed up the slope behind me.

I reached the porch and hung onto a canted post to regain my breath and beat back the illogical fear that had gathered in the dark. I was almost myself again when I knocked upon the door—and had to knock a second and a third time because the howling of the storm drowned out the sound of knuckles.

The old manservant let me in and it seemed to me that he moved more slowly on feet that dragged a little more than I had remembered, that he talked more thickly, as if a hand were at his throat.

Adams had changed too. He still was stiff and formal, almost distant, but he was prim no longer. He had not shaved for a day or two and his eyes were haggard and there was a sly nervousness about him that put me on edge.

He did not seem surprised to see me and when I mentioned the storm that had driven me to cover he passed over it with agreement that it was a dirty night. It was as if I lived just across the way and had dropped in for an hour or two.

There was no mention of anything to eat, no indication that he even suspected I hoped to spend the night.

Awkwardly, or at least awkwardly on my part, we talked of inconsequential things. Adams seemed wholly at ease although his face and hands were nervous.

Shortly the talk veered to his studies and I gathered from his words that he had dropped all other phases of his research to concentrate upon the punishments and tortures man had inflicted upon his fellows from the advent of historic time.

Hunched in his chair, staring at the wall, he called up the bloody sadism that had left a trail of blood and pain across the centuries, linking the old Egyptian king whose proudest title had been the Cracker of Foreheads to the man whose smoking revolver piled the dead knee-deep in Russian cellars.

He knew in detail how men had been staked out for the ants, how others had been buried to the neck in desert sands, and he assured me most solemnly that the American Indian had been a past master at the art of burning, that the expert "questioners" of the Inquisition, in this respect at least, had been no

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more than quasi-efficient bunglers.

He talked of racks and quarterings, of hooks that ripped out a man's insides—and behind the hard cold words of erudition that he spoke I smelled the smoke and blood and heard the screams and the creaking of the ropes and the clanking of the chains.

But he did not, I am sure, know anything of this.

Then it came, the topic he had been leading up to, the quicksilver problem that slid within his brain, waiting to be grasped and solved—the end product of all the things he knew.

"But they all fall short of perfect," he said. "There is no such thing as a perfect torture, for always in the end the victim dies or gives in and the torture halts. There is no way of measuring what a man's resistance is. Sometimes you overdo it and he dies, other times you allow the victim to escape the full rigor of the execution for fear that he has reached the limit of endurance, which he hasn't."

"A perfect torture!" I said and I know my words must have been both a question and an exclamation point. For even then I didn't understand. Even then I couldn't understand why a man should be interested, even academically, in a perfect torture. Such interest seemed to verge on madness.

It was fantastic—sitting there in that old Wisconsin farmhouse with the first winter's storm raging against the windows, to hear a man talk calmly and learnedly about the technical problems of efficient torture past and present.

"Perhaps in hell," said Foster Adams, "but certainly not on earth. For human beings are crude things and the things they do are crude."

"Hell?" I asked him. "Do you believe in hell? A literal hell?"

He laughed at me and from the laugh I could not tell whether he did or not.

I looked at my watch and it was almost midnight. "I must be going now," I said. "The storm seems to have slackened a bit."

But I made no move to rise from my chair, for certainly, I thought, a hint as broad as that would get me an invitation for the night.

Adams said merely, "I'm sorry you must go. I had hoped you could stay another hour."

I was so angry as I trudged down the hill, back to the car, that I did not hear the feet behind me for some time. They must, I am sure, have followed me from the house but I did not hear them.

The storm had slackened and the wind was dying down and here and there the stars were shining through the scudding clouds.

I was halfway down the hill before I heard the footsteps, although thinking back upon it, I am certain that I had been hearing them for some time before I became aware of them. And hearing them, I knew they were made not by man but by some animal, for I could hear the click of hoofs and the cracking of hocks as they skidded on the ice that lay beneath the snow.

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I stopped and swung around but there was nothing on the road behind me, although the footsteps kept coming on. But when they had drawn close they stopped and waited, only to start up again as soon as I went on, following me down the hill, letting me set the pace, keeping just out of sight.

A cow, I thought, although that seemed strange, for I was sure that Adams had no cow and cows as a rule do not wander down a road on a stormy night. And the hoofbeats too were not those of a cow.

I stopped several times and once I shouted at the thing that followed and after the third or fourth time I realized it no longer followed me.

Somehow I got the car turned around. Before I reached the main highway the machine bogged down three times but by dint of good luck and some profanity I got moving again. The highway was easier traveling and I reached home shortly after dawn.

Three days later I had a letter from Adams that was a half apology. He had been overworked, he said, and not quite himself. He hoped that I would overlook any eccentricity. But he did not mention his lack of hospitality. I presume that came under the heading of "eccentricity."

It was almost a year before I saw him again. By roundabout fashion I learned that his old manservant had died and that now he lived alone. I thought about him often, feeling that he must be lonely, for the servant had been, it seemed, his only human contact. But I was still a little put out by the snowstorm incident and I made no move to visit him again.

Then I got a second letter, really no more than a note. He indicated that he had something of interest to show me and that he would feel obliged if I would stop by the next time I happened to be in his section of the country. There was no word of the manservant's death, no indication that Adams was lonely for human companionship, nothing to hint that his life was not exactly the same as it had been before. Terse, businesslike, the note made its point and that was all.

I waited a decent interval, for I was determined on two things—that I would demonstrate to my own satisfaction that the man had no hold upon me and that I would not rush off quickly at his summons. I felt the need to demonstrate toward him a certain degree of coolness for his shabby treatment of me that November night.

But finally I went and the house was the same as before except that it looked slightly shabbier and the cellar door had completely rotted and fallen in and another shutter or two had dropped from the windows.

Adams let me in and I was shocked at the change in him. He was unshaven and his beard was turning grey in spots. His hair hung down over his collar and his hands were unwashed with thick lines of black beneath broken fingernails. His collar and cuffs were ragged and his coat was threadbare. Splotches

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of dried egg had dribbled down his chin and spattered upon his shirt. He wore scuffed carpet slippers which made a swishing scraping noise as he walked along the hall.

He greeted me with the same aloofness as always and led me to the parlor, which seemed darker and mustier than ever before. Although his eyes were bright and his voice as firm as ever there was a fumbling attitude about him, a faint unsureness in his speech and manner.

He complimented me upon my novel and mentioned that he was gratified to see I had made good use of the information he had been able to supply me. But from the way he talked about it I felt sure he had not read the book.

"And now," he said, "I was wondering if you would mind looking over something *I* have written."

There was nothing I could do but indicate my willingness.

He shuffled to an old and battered rolltop desk. From it he took a heavy manuscript, tied with cord. "The facts are there," he said, "but I am poor at the tricks of writing. I wonder if you . . ."

He waited for me to say it and I did. "I'll look it over," I told him. "If I can be of any help I'll do it gladly."

I was about to ask him about the subject matter when he asked me if I had heard about his servant. I told him I had heard that the old man had died.

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all," I said.

Adams sat down heavily in his chair. "He was found dead," he told me, "and I understood there have been some lurid stories making the rounds of the neighborhood."

I was about to reply when a sound froze me in the chair. Something was sniffing at the door that opened on the porch.

Adams must not have heard it—either that or he must have heard it so often on previous occasions that he no longer paid attention to it, for he went on talking. "They found him out in the north pasture, at the end of the ridge. He was rather badly mangled."

"Mangled!" I whispered and I couldn't have spoken another word nor uttered it aloud had I been paid for it, for the creature was back at the door again, sniffing and snorting. At any moment I expected to hear the sound of nails clawing at the wood.

"Some animal must have got to him before he was found," said Adams.

I sat there, gooseflesh coming out on me, listening to the thing sniffing up and down the door crack. Once or twice it whined. But Adams still did not hear it or pretended not to hear it, for he went on talking, telling me about the manuscript.

"It's not completed," he said. "There is a final chapter, but I'll have the information soon and then I can finish it. There's just a little more research, just a little more. I am very, very close."

Now, for the first time, I saw it although I must have been staring at it ever since I came into the room

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—the thing upon the wall that was not the way it should be.

Now, for the first time, I saw it plainly and knew it for what it was —a crucifix turned upside down—turned upside down and nailed to the wall.

I stumbled to my feet, clutching the manuscript beneath my arm, muttering that I must go, that I had forgotten something, that I must go at once.

Behind me, as I left the room, I heard the shrill whimpering eagerness of the animal whining at the door, the sound of claws ripping at the wood, trying to get in.

My scalp was crawling and I know I must have run. Even now, thinking back on it, I have no apology to make. For the sounds at the door were sounds of fear deep graven in Man's soul, reaching back to the dim obscurity of the days when Man crouched in a cave and listened to the padding and snuffling and the whining of the things outside in the dark.

I reached the car and stood there, one hand on the door, ready to get in. Now that I had reached safety I suddenly was brave. I saw that the house was nothing more than an old farmhouse, that there was nothing in the world to be afraid of either in or out of it.

I opened the door, walked over and put one foot on the car's running-board. As I did I glanced downward and it was then I saw the tracks. Tracks like those a cow would make but smaller, more like the tracks of a goat perhaps. I wondered for the moment if Adams might keep goats and I knew instinctively that he didn't. Although it was entirely possible that some animals from adjoining farms might have broken through a fence and wandered here.

Now I saw that the barren trampled ground was a solid network of those cloven tracks and I remembered the night of the storm when something that sounded like a creature with hoofs had trailed me down the road.

I got into the car and slammed the door behind me and as if the sound of the slamming door were a signal a dog came around the corner of the house. He was big and black and sleek and as he walked I saw the muscles knotting and flowing beneath his shining hide. There was a sense of strength and speed about him as he slouched along.

He turned his head toward me and I saw his eyes. I shall not forget them—ever. They were filled with a terrible evil, an utter cynicism, and they were not a dog's eyes.

I stepped on the starter and put the accelerator to the boards. Ten miles later I finally stopped my shaking.

Home at last, I broke out a bottle and sat in the late autumn sunlight on the porch, drinking steadily and by myself, something I had never done before but have done often since that day.

When darkness fell, I went indoors and looked through Adams' manuscript and it was the very

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thing that I had expected. It was a history of torture and of punishment, all the vast historic evidence of man's inhumanity to man. There were sketches and drawings and minute specifications concerning the construction and operation of every infernal machine the mind of man has been able to invent. The development of torture was traced with studious exactitude and each method was discussed in its many variations, with all the little trivial details of procedure carefully annotated.

And there were tortures listed that are very little known and almost never spoken of and scarcely fit to print.

Skimming through the pages I came to Chapter XLVIII and I saw that the writing ended there, that there was only the beginning of a paragraph upon the page.

It read—

*But the ultimate torture, the torture that goes on and on, eternally, always just short of madness and of death, is found only in the depths of Hell and until now no mortal being has ever held the knowledge, prior to death, of the torments of the Pit . . .*

I laid the manuscript on the table and reached for the bottle. But the bottle was empty and I hurled it across the room and it struck the fireplace and was smashed into flying shards that twinkled in the lamplight. I sat hunched in my chair and felt the hairy hands of Hell stretch out for me and not quite reach me and the perspiration ran down my body and my heart was in my throat.

For Adams knew—he either knew or meant to know. He had said that there was just a little research needed for him to complete the book, just a little information he still must get. And I remembered the tracks out in the yard and the dog with eyes that were not a dog's eyes and the creature, possibly the dog, that had been scratching at the door during my visit.

I sat there for a long time but finally I got out of the chair and went to my desk. From a drawer I took a gun that had been there for a long time and I checked its action and saw that it was loaded. Then I got out the car and drove like a madman down the night road toward a madman's retreat.

Scudding clouds covered the dying moon that lay above the western ridges when I reached the Smith farmhouse and the house itself reared up like a ghostly creation in the pre-dawn silence that lay across the hills.

Nothing stirred and there were no lighted windows. The wind came fresh and cold across the river valley and there was frost upon the fields. The porch boards creaked as I crossed them and knocked at the door—but there was no answer. I knocked again and yet again and there was still no answer, so I turned the knob and the door came slowly open.

The moaning had been too soft

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and faint to hear through the door but it was there, waiting for me, when I came into the entryway that led into the kitchen.

It was a mewling rather than a moan, as if the tongue that made it belonged to a mindless creature. It sounded as if it had been much louder only a little time before, but now had dwindled through sheer physical exhaustion.

I found the gun in my pocket and my hand was shaking as I pulled it out. I wanted to run, I wanted very much to run. But I couldn't run, for I had to know. I had to know that whatever it might be was not as bad as I imagined it.

I slid into the kitchen and from there into the dining-room and the moaning began low and soared into a whimper, then rose to what would have been a scream if the creature that voiced it had had the strength to scream.

In the parlor I saw something on the floor and moved cautiously toward it. The thing upon the floor writhed and cowered and moaned and when it became aware of me it dragged itself toward me and I knew that it was begging, although it made no words, but begged with the heart-rending sounds that emanated from its mouth.

I backed against the wall, trying to get away, but it reached me and lifted up hooked claws and wrapped its arms around my knees. Its head tilted back to look at me and I saw the face of Foster Adams. The room was dark, for the blinds were tightly pulled as always and the first faint grey of dawn was just beginning to paint the dining-room windows.

I could not see the face too well and for that I always have been thankful. For the eyes were wider and whiter than I remembered them and the lips were pulled back in a frozen snarl of fear. There were flecks of foam upon the beard.

"Adams," I shouted at him. "Adams, what has happened?"

But there was no need to ask. I knew. Not what Adams knew—not the mind-shattering hell-raw facts that Adams knew—only that he had found the thing he sought. By reversed crucifix, by nails clawing at the door, by goat-tracks in the yard he had found the answer.

Nor did he answer me. His arms slipped from my legs and he fell upon the floor and lay very still and I knew that Foster Adams was beyond all answering.

Then, for the first time, I became aware of another in the room, a motionless blackness that stood in the deepest shadow.

For a moment I stood there above the sprawled body of Foster Adams and looked at the other in the room, not seeing him too well, for it was still quite dark. And he looked back at me. Still silent, I put the gun back into my pocket and turned around and left.

Behind me I heard the other walking across the floor. Hoofs crackled and hocks snapped and the rhythm of the footsteps told me that he walked not on four legs but on two.

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# a great deal of power

*by . . . . Eric Frank Russell*

**William Smith came very close to being the ideal robot. In fact his only flaw was his built-in ideals.**

WURMSER—fat, balding, with eyes like marble—gloated over William Smith, smacked his lips and said, "There you are—complete, tried and tested, a soldier of the Sixth Reich."

"With a thousand to follow," added Speidel. "Or ten thousand. Or one million." He was tall, thin, angular and looked like a hungry vulture.

The third man in the room, Kluge—crop-headed, with heavy jowls and the cold authoritative stare of a high-ranking officer—observed harshly, "It would be better not to count one's conquests before one has made them." He favored William Smith with an expression of mixed disapproval and doubt. "We have first to discover whether this civilian-styled dummy is as efficient as you claim."

"Want to bet?" asked Speidel.

"I am not interested in profiting by failures," Kluge told him stiffly. "I am concerned only with successes."

"You'll see," Wurmser told him. He turned, snapped at William Smith, "Stand up!"

William Smith stood up. He was of medium height, handsome, thirty-

*Here is a story that poses a fascinating question—and one which mere humans have found exceedingly difficult to answer. Is it possible to create a weapon capable of destroying men of power without creating an even more powerful menace than its victims? In William Smith one small group of highly intelligent men believed they had found this answer. For William Smith was a robot. Unfortunately, however, William Smith had to be taught to think if he was to attain fulfillment of his mission.*



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ish, well-groomed and looked intelligent.

"Your name?"

"William Smith."

"Your purpose?"

"To destroy power at the direction of my masters."

Kluge lowered his brows and demanded, "How?"

"I shall request each nominee to surrender power voluntarily. If he refuses he dies."

"How?" persisted Kluge.

"I create within him the desire to die and he nourishes it to the very end."

"You hate power?" prompted Wurmser.

"I hate power," confirmed William Smith, his complete lack of emphasis somehow lending force to his words.

Kluge complained to Speidel, "It is about this that I have some misgivings. I have gone to the trouble of reading several authorities upon hypnosis. All say the same—a man cannot be compelled to do anything against his natural inclinations, anything which infringes upon his moral code."

"That is true—of hypnosis." Speidel grinned, exposing his teeth. "This faculty of his is not hypnosis. Don't ask me what else it is because we don't know. It is something we stumbled upon by accident and developed."

"Complete mental mastery," suggested Wurmser. "And it works!" He paused, went on. "Certain Eastern mystics can and occasionally do will themselves into Nirvana or, in other words, death. Usually it takes them several days. No autopsy reveals an William Smith. "He can make every organic cause." He gestured toward victim go one better. We know—we've tried him out on a couple of handy deadbeats. They expired within hours, minutes"—he chuckled flatly—"*Of natural causes.*"

"A dim-witted guinea-pig is one thing," opined Kluge, unimpressed. "A strong-willed man is another. In time of war—any kind of war—one has to overcome strong-willed opposition."

"He can do it," said Speidel, betraying not a shadow of doubt. "He can fight a war so cunningly that the enemy won't even know it has started."

"The days of map-battles are through," contributed Wurmser with a touch of malice. "No more throwing of masses of pawns against other masses of pawns. This is twenty-first-century super-chess. We leave the pawns undisturbed while we snatch away the big pieces one by one. They just vanish from the board—of natural causes."

"I know the proposed technique." Kluge waved an impatient hand. "After all, I had a share in devising it. The fact that our methods will be radically different from any employed in the past does not make the war any the less a military operation. I view it from that aspect. Therefore I am duly cautious."

"No more careful than we." Speidel handed him a list. "See for yourself. This is his first short list of victims. All are strong-willed men possessed of considerable per-

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sonal power. Do you notice anything peculiar about them?"

"None are key-members of the opposition," said Kluge, examining the list.

"Therefore the opposition will not smell danger before our first real test is completed," Speidel pointed out. "Not being affected by it they won't be interested, won't be suspicious. Indeed, all these powerful men have so little to do with the enemy military machine that their preliminary passing will serve only to confuse the issue when we do get started in earnest."

"I approve." Kluge gave him back the sheet of paper. "You have exercised your imagination. I compliment you on it."

"Thank you, Colonel-General." Speidel was openly gratified. He passed the list to William Smith. "Deal with these."

Pocketing the list, William Smith picked up his hat. His clear-cut features were impassive. He might have been a young suburban husband casually going out to mail a letter.

Watching him, Wurmser said, "You have all your papers and passports?"

"I have them."

"And you can think?"

"I can think."

"On no account will you return before completion of your task?"

"I shall not return," agreed William Smith evenly.

"And in a grave emergency, the last resort . . . ?"

"I shall press the red button which is set in my chest and thus destroy myself." His hand moved to his jacket.

"Don't touch it *here*," yelped Wurmser, involuntarily backing away fast. "Don't touch it at all unless there is positively no other way out."

"Jumpy, aren't you?" said Speidel. "The red button isn't set that delicately. I wouldn't give him ten minutes if it were. Believe me, it takes some pressing."

"That may be," said Wurmser, "but a hand like his is pretty heavy and you can't judge his touch by yours or mine." He shuddered, licked dry lips, said to William Smith, "You may go."

Putting on his hat William Smith departed without a word. The trio in the room watched in silence until the door closed behind him. A long minute later Wurmser heaved a sigh of relief.

Kluge remarked, "You can make ingenious soldiers of plastics and metals, you and Speidel. You would not shine as soldiers yourselves."

"What of it? The cannon-fodder days have gone."

"Humph!" Kluge's air was that of one accommodating himself to a vastly changed present while still hankering for the past. Old-style wars were easier to handle—they embodied established and familiar rules.

Newton P. Fisher heaved his ample bulk out of the limousine, puffed his hanging chops. His slightly protruding eyes were cold as they observed the meek well-

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dressed young man waiting nearby.

"No comment," he growled. "Beat it—scram!"

"But, Mr. Fisher, please allow—"

"Allow *nothing*." Newton P. Fisher glowered at him. "I've been taken many a ride by you reporters. Now it's your turn. Skip back to your garbage dump."

"Look, Mr. Fisher, my name is Smith, William Smith." His words came swiftly, trying to hold the other while something in his eyes burned steadily through. "If only you would permit me a minute of your time . . ."

"Pawson." Fisher turned to the blue-jawed, burly man who followed him out of the car. "This thing smells. Do something about it." He jerked his jacket straight with a defiant pull at the lapels, marched pompously into the building. The eyes followed him all the way.

Folding thick arms across his big chest Pawson stared belligerently at the frustrated interviewer, noted that the other was not fazed. "Now," began Pawson, "what's the idea of chivvying the boss?"

"Mr. Fisher has much power."

"You bet he has," agreed Pawson. "So what?"

"He must give it up."

"Yeah? To whom? To you?"

"Heaven forbid," said William Smith fervently. "I couldn't dream of such a thing."

"Neither could Fisher," assured Pawson. He made shooting motions. "All right, Nutski, on your way."

"But—"

"Skedad!" insisted Pawson. "Go some place else and brood—and wish the boss dead if you want."

"I have already done so." Tipping his hat slightly William Smith walked away, impassive, unhurried, peculiarly self-confident.

Watching him go Pawson threw a grin at the chauffeur, put a hairy finger to his forehead and made screwing motions. The chauffeur grinned back. "He didn't hand out any pamphlets."

"Saves me tearing them up." Pawson strolled toward the building into which Fisher had disappeared. "Stick around, Lou, the boss won't be long." He went through the door.

Leaning on the wheel, the chauffeur picked his teeth, mooned up the street, pondered about crazy folk in general and the recent sample in particular. The sample was now out of sight.

Pawson reappeared three or four minutes later. He emerged from the doorway at a cumbersome run. Reaching the car he braced himself against its nearside door while he panted for breath. His eyes were searching the street—his features seemed molded in stale dough.

After a while he wheezed, *"Christmas!"*

"Something wrong?" asked the chauffeur.

"Not much,"—Pawson sucked in another lungful—"only the boss just curled up his toes for keeps."

There was nothing about this Brussels office to suggest that Raoul Lefevre was the biggest man in Belgium and one of the forty biggest

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in the world. Neither was there anything outstanding in appearance about Lefevre himself. Slight, dapper, dark, he would pass anywhere as the normal nondescript component of a crowd.

"Sit down, Mr. Smith." His English was perfect. "So you had contact with the late Newton P. Fisher. His end was a great shock. It upset quite a lot of things."

"It was intended to," said William Smith.

"Many of them may not be readjusted for months, perhaps years, and . . ." He perked up, gave his caller a sharp look. "What was that remark you just made?"

"It was intended to."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"The Fisherless chaos was created."

Leaning forward, elbows on desk, Lefevre said slowly and deliberately, "Press reports make no suggestion that Fisher's death was engineered. Are you asserting that he was murdered?"

"Executed," corrected William Smith.

Studying him carefully Lefevre asked, "Who sent you to tell me about this?"

"I have come more or less automatically."

"Why?"

"Because you are next on the list."

"Next?" Lefevre was puzzled. "On *what* list. *Whose* list?"

"Mine."

"Let me get this straight. Are you trying to warn me that you have obtained from somewhere a roster of persons who are fated for death, that Fisher was first on that list and that I am second?"

"Precisely," agreed William Smith, his eyes burning strangely at the other. "Though you may save yourself by voluntarily surrendering all your considerable influence."

"Who says so?" demanded Lefevre.

"I do."

"Ah!" Standing up, his expression pained, Lefevre pressed a wall-stud. "I perceive that you have gained an interview under false pretenses. You are not connected with Fisher in any way. You are merely another crank. I have long been the target of cranks —in my position it is inevitable." He turned to the one who had answered his call. "Emile, please show Mr. Smith out. See that he does not return."

"There will be no necessity," William Smith assured. "My purpose has been served." He went out, accompanied by the silent Emile and conscious of the other's grim stare behind him.

Crossing the road he found a bench in the tiny gardens facing Lefevre's office, sat there gazing steadily at the second floor window. Now and again his attention moved off to follow the visivox wires as if speculating what unhearable unseeable stirrings might be running within them—but always his gaze returned to the window.

One hour and fourteen minutes later a long silvery automobile slid up to the main door, a bearded man got out. Bearing a small black case he hustled through the front door.

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Still William Smith watched the window and the wires.

After awhile someone pulled curtains across the window. William Smith did not bother to wait until the death-wagon arrived.

Ignace Tatarescu smoothed his black skin-tight uniform, adjusted the black-and-gold ribbon of a jeweled order around his neck, carefully centered its sparkling cross in line with his triple row of brag-rags.

"This Smith does not offer himself at a convenient time," he grumbled to his valet. "However, he is well introduced and I suppose I had better afford him a few minutes." He studied himself in a full-length mirror. "Always I am affording a few minutes for someone. Where would the world be if I had not enough minutes?"

"It is a problem, excellency."

"Oh, well, show him in. Have the small table set with brandied coffee and sweetmeats." He paraded to his favorite spot by the fireplace, struck his favorite pose and held it until his visitor entered. "Mr. Smith?"

"Yes, your excellency."

"Please be seated." Lowering himself into an ornate chair Tatarescu ran finger and thumb along the creases of his colorful pants. "Why have you sought this interview, Mr. Smith?"

"You are strong."

"Of course." Tatarescu preened himself. "The world needs strong men. Therefore I am strong."

"Too strong," said William Smith, looking at him steadily without blinking.

"What a diplomat!" laughed Tatarescu. "He gains an interview and promptly uses it to criticise my position for which, permit me to tell you, young man, I have fought long and hard."

"More's the pity," remarked William Smith.

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"It will be so much the more difficult for you to give it up."

"I have not the slightest intention of giving it up. When Tatarescu gives up Tatarescu will be dead."

"You said it!" William Smith stated.

The other scowled. It was a much-practiced expression. "If that is a threat, bear in mind that we are not as alone as we seem. One overt move on your part will mark your end." He raised his voice, called toward the door, "Escort Mr. Smith to the main gates." Then to his visitor, "The interview is over. You will never be granted another one by me."

"No," agreed William Smith, still looking at him. "Of course not."

Choosing that moment to gaze straight into those queer orbs Tatarescu saw in them an elusive something that should not have been there, something of pinhead size and far back, something supernally brilliant, intense, compelling, irresistible. It seemed to be twisting his own brain into a new and unwanted path. He came erect, rising like one in a dream. His voice, when it came, was low and hoarse.

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"Never—*never!*" He shouted it.

"We shall see." William Smith bowed from the waist, backed toward the frowning guards now waiting inside the door, permitted them to conduct him away. He left the room full of silence.

Once outside the palace he climbed the path to the crest of an overlooking hill, squatted cross-legged at the top. There he brooded over the ornate edifice until dusk approached and lights began to twinkle in the neighboring city.

He was still there, waiting in the darkness, when bells of the city's churches tolled monotonously and the loudspeakers of the civic address system boomed their news through streets and avenues.

"*Al Marechal Murte!*"

"Tatarescu is no more!"

Behind the slums of Tangier, at the desert end of the Street of the Ouled Naïls, lay the Sharia Ahmed Hassan, a long dark dirty alley through which William Smith carefully picked his way.

Counting the low doors set in the massive wall at one side he reached the one he wanted, pulled its dangling bell-cord, waited patiently. Soon a thin-featured Arab appeared, took his card.

He heard the other's slippers shuffling away through the night shadows of the courtyard, and a distant, low mutter of, "*A Giaour!*"

Many minutes crawled past before the Arab returned, beckoned to him, led him through the courtyard, through numberless passages and into a deeply carpeted room. There he paused to view the old white-bearded man facing him across a low octagonal table. The old man had a beak nose, rheumy but crafty eyes, kept his hands hidden in his capacious sleeves.

"I am William Smith."

The oldster nodded, said in a rasping voice, "So your card says."

"You are Abou ben Sayyid es Harouma?"

"I am. What of it?"

"According to my list you are to be requested to return to the obscurity whence you came."

"Indeed? You are amazingly candid." Abou ben Sayyid drew a hand from a sleeve, used it to stroke his beard. "In my long years I have been the subject of surprising suggestions and many highly imaginative threats. Nevertheless, as you cannot help but perceive, I am very far from dead."

"Not far," corrected William Smith. "Nearer than you think."

Abou ben Sayyid sighed resignedly and smote a gong by his side. "The moon is full. It is always at such a time that Hakim the Cobbler becomes queer in the head. Goodbye, Mr. Smith."

Three servants came in at the run. William Smith stood staring, staring until Abou said impatiently to the servants, "I am heavy with the burden of years and he tires me. Take him away." He lay back exhaustedly to prove it. He was an easy mark.

William Smith got back into the lane. The courtyard door clanged

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shut. The bell-cord hung limp, unstirring in the night air.

Leaning against the facing wall, hands deep in his pockets, he waited until after forty minutes a terrible keening arose from the house.

"Aie! Aie-e-ee!"

Beneath the veiled moon he strolled away.

A certain Salvador de Marella, of Cartagena, was the last name on this brief, experimental list of guinea-pigs. Salvador was not sharp like Lefevre, nor ruthless like Taterescu, nor cunning as Abou ben Sayyid. He was the supreme opportunist with more than his share of luck—and he enjoyed the delusion that it would never run out.

Salvador had all the jovial humor of the really successful gambler. He interviewed William Smith and laughed and laughed and laughed.

And laughed himself to death.

All three were there waiting—Wurmser, Speidel and Kluge—when William Smith came back. The first two were gleeful, triumphant—the last one stolid. They had not needed to bide their instrument's personal account of his adventures. The radio and the video already had told them enough.

William Smith came quietly in, hung up his hat, stood in the middle of the room. It was as if standing were to him a natural life-long pose. As became an automaton he never sat unless asked or ordered.

"Perfect," declared Speidel, rubbing satisfied hands together and looking at Kluge. "Perfect even to the prompt and obedient return. A boomerang that comes right back so that we can use it again and again. Does this cure your scepticism?"

"Nothing will ever cure my scepticism," said Kluge. "For instance, it would be a great improvement if he could deal effectively with his victims without the necessity of meeting them face to face and indulging in futile argument."

"Impossible! He must make close mental contact for a minimum period to implant a delayed death-desire. There is no way of doing it remotely. If there were we would not need him at all."

"I know, I know," said Kluge. "Therefore I shall concede that you have created a weapon of value."

"You bet we have," Wurmser indorsed. "And it has functioned precisely as designed."

"Of sufficient worth," Kluge continued, ignoring him, "to justify my bringing it to the attention of the proper authorities. It should no longer be a secret among ourselves."

"Secrecy will still be necessary," Spiedel pointed out.

"I am not an imbecile," Kluge retorted irritably. "Neither are the authorities imbeciles. The task of multiplying and directing this new robotic weapon will be conducted efficiently and with circumspection."

To divert the other's manifest annoyance Speidel turned to William Smith and said, "Do you hear that? There is to be an army of Smiths."

William Smith spoke, his tones

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as flat and unemotional as ever. "You enabled me to think. Therefore I have been thinking."

"So?" prompted Speidel.

"You also conditioned me to have an intense revulsion for personal power. So I hate power."

"Quite right too," agreed Speidel, throwing the others an amused wink.

"Through me *you* have power," remarked William Smith.

Speidel and Wurmser stiffened. Kluge squared his shoulders.

"The conclusion is obvious and unavoidable," William Smith went on. "I have reached it because you made me what I am. So you must be destroyed."

Wurmser shuffled backward, talking in high squeaks. "You cannot give *us* the death-desire. We foresaw that risk and conditioned you against it. You can project your will only where instructed by us. You must obey and project it only where instructed. Understand?"

William Smith spoke with terrifying lack of morbidity. "I understand. I know too that you could take me to pieces as easily as you put me together." Again his eyes went over them. "But that would not destroy your power because it is hidden in the inventiveness of your minds. You could soon make a thousand exactly like me."

"Where's a blaster?" Speidel tensed, looked searchingly around the room. "He has no instinct of self-preservation and would let me burn him down where he stands, like the dummy he is. Has anyone got a blaster?"

Kluge shook his head, continued to watch William Smith.

"Yet I cannot give you the death-compulsion," William Smith mused, neither pleased nor grieved about it. "It is forbidden. My circuits embody a block which prevents me doing what is necessary. Anyway, I would not impose it upon you."

"Why not?" inquired Kluge.

"Because that would leave *me* possessed of power. I would stand alone, full of this aptitude which I have been conditioned to destroy."

"You're in quite a fix, aren't you?" suggested Kluge.

"You're all tangled up in cockeyed logic," added Speidel.

"He has a gaunt and hungry look," quoted Wurmser, absorbing fresh courage from the others.

"Such men are dangerous," reminded Kluge, erect as on parade.

William Smith murmured more to himself than to his hearers, "This impasse is more apparent than real because the solution is easy. It was built into me. It is the conditioned escape—and the logical ending." His hand, poised above his chest. *"This is an emergency."*

*"No!"* screamed Wurmser. *"No!"* He flapped his hands with sheer horror. Speidel ran for the door. Kluge stayed put, frozen-eyed, unmoving. *"No!"* screamed Wurmser.

The hand smacked the chest right over the concealed red button. The resulting explosion wrecked an entire street, sent a huge column of pulverised brickwork cloud-high.

Behind that button had lurked a great deal of power.

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# universe in books

*by . . . the Editor*

**Your critic looks over a varied bag of new science and fantasy.**

STAR SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, edited by Frederik Pohl, Ballantine Books, New York (35c and $1.50).

Frederik Pohl, who, as fan, author, editor and author's agent, has probably played more active roles in the science fiction world than any other human, here combines all four functions in a worthy anthology of all-new stories by some fifteen crack writers. As fan, he accumulated sufficient infectious interest and excitement to cook up the idea and sell it. As author he wrote the deft introduction and notes. As editor he decided what stories and authors he wanted and prepared them for the printer. As agent he went out and got those stories and in some cases sold them to himself.

All in all, a very happy multiple personality-split all around. Especially since, thanks to the Ballantine liberality in paying large advances, top-flight authors could for once afford to forego magazine sales. The result is an outstanding volume.

The stories? They are by (in the order of their appearance) William Morrison, Cyril Kornbluth, Lester del Rey, Fritz Leiber, Clifford D. Simak, John Wyndham, William Tenn, H. L. Gold, Judith Merril, Ray

*As is entirely fitting in a subject whose realm ranges from the neutron to the polygalactic sweep, the field of writing, loosely termed science fiction or science fantasy, consists of innumerable levels: Many literary light-years, for instance, separate Buck Rogers from Olaf Stapledon's Odd John, or Mandrake the Magician from Ylla of the Martian Chronicles. Yet your true addict, magically, finds magic in them all.*



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Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Robert Sheckley, H. Kuttner & C. L. Moore, Murray Leinster and Arthur C. Clarke.

You'll have to select your own favorites, for all have merit both in concept and execution. We personally went most heavily for the tales by Morrison, Bradbury, Sheckley, del Rey and the Kuttner-Moore combine. But there isn't a bad story in the entire book.

THE DEMOLISHED MAN by Alfred Bester, Shasta Publishers, Chicago ($3.00).

Mr. Bester's maiden effort as a novelist may well turn out to be the best science fiction long story of 1953. Certainly, as published serially, it was the best magazine story of 1952 in the field. Its appearance, without fanfare or forewarning, caused this moderately thoughtful critic to wonder a trifle wistfully how many such stf talents are lying around undiscovered, spending their abilities in other forms of work or other forms of fiction.

Probably there aren't very many —but still . . .

Mr. Bester's plot is an intricate one, involving a futureworld in which several levels of telepathy and psi-qualities co-exist. It includes a couple of romances, a murder, a major power-conspiracy and probably the damnedest alibi ever thought of anywhere at anytime, including New York and London in the eras of Philo Vance and Sherlock Holmes respectively. It is a full and satisfactory meal of a story.

The author himself is not exactly a newcomer to science fiction. He began by winning a magazine amateur contest some fifteen or so years ago, sold quite a number of short yarns and novelets. However, Mammon beckoned and he wound up as a prosperous radio script-writer and has transferred himself quite painlessly to being a television ditto.

Which is why he has not written more stf. We hope a lot of people buy this book so that he will be able to afford to write a lot more of it. The field needs a man of his caliber.

THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN; a collection of stories by Ray Bradbury, Doubleday & Co., New York, ($3.00).

The latest all-Bradbury collection is another stunning job. Much of it is not science fiction at all—but each story bears the unmistakable and elusive tracery of fantasy, either in large or small dosage. More important, each of them bears the unmistakable imprint of Bradbury magic.

Once again it's each man for himself when it comes to picking favorites among the twenty-two stories included—but we liked best *Invisible Boy, I See You Never, A Sound of Thunder, The Meadow* and the title story, which comes last in the book. A varied bag, for the first is a tale of crabbed age and youth, imbodied by a lonesome hag-witch and a cunning (in its true, not its colloquial sense) little boy—

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a non-fantastic brief brief about the Mexican slums of Los Angeles—a horrendous time-travelling dinosaur safari—an odd and haunting whimsy about an abandoned movie lot—and a tensely effective vignette of what it might be like to milk the sun itself of its secrets.

About all we can add is that we liked the other stories too.

AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT by Arthur C. Clarke, Gnome Press, New York ($3.00).

Within the last year the brilliant head-man of the intensely erudite British Interplanetary Society seems to have come into his own. He has had a number of books published, made important magazine sales to important markets, even had a non-fiction work upon space travel selected by the Book of the Month Club. New assignments of both fascinating and lucrative nature loom ahead of him, perhaps more than he will be able to fill in the foreseeable future.

This volume, belatedly published, is his first novel—and it is a honey. It seems probable that the delay in its publication—it received magazine serialization all of six years ago—was caused by the fear of its publisher that the dreaminess of its atmosphere, which is the basis of much of its charm, would be miserably misunderstood in an era of hard-cover science fiction devoted to BEMs and bang-bang space opera.

Since this infantile period seems to be safely past, we can at last read in book form Mr. Clarke's fine story of a very bright lad of a very distant futureworld and his strange search for a heritage lost ages before his time. Let us be sure that we do read it—for it is one of the finest novels science fiction has yet produced.

HELLFLOWER by George O. Smith, Abelard Press, New York ($2.75).

George O. Smith is not a writer who is ever likely to receive serious consideration by the judges of the Nobel Prize for Literature. He might not, on literary merit, win even the bubble-gum badge for the best essay on the Life and Times of Carrie Chapman Catt awarded by the Little Silver Browning Society.

But Smith has other claims to fame. He is a fine scientist, one who gets paid for it too, and more unusual yet, a scientist with a sense of humor. Hence his ingenuity for extrapolation is virtually unmatched in stf and at times his joyous ribaldry is an editorial headache.

However, when he keeps the horseplay within bounds and really bends to his task, Smith can produce a highly readable book. He has done just this in *Hellflower*, perhaps the swiftest-moving story of interstellar conspiracy ever written. It is well-plotted and packed with surprises—so many and so varied that it is easy to forget such minor detriments as creaky characterization (when the author bothers with characterization at all) and a totally inept style.

In short, despite a few shortcomings, it's a lot of fun to read.

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## *EASY READING*

In reviewing Ray Bradbury's latest collection of short stories, THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN, for the New York *Herald Tribune* recently, Margaret Parton stated that until then she had been inclined to pooh-pooh science fiction as having no connection with reality. She expressed surprise at finding that those stories in Mr. Bradbury's collection (see UNIVERSE IN BOOKS, this issue) which dealt with space-travel and other stf subjects were the most effective in the book.

Too many people seem to shy away from science fiction without reading it for the same reason. Frankly they consider it tripe, untested. And too many others fear to tackle it because they are afraid of getting trapped in a welter of scientific facts and speculations beyond their understanding.

Both schools are absolutely wrong.

Science fiction unreal? Hardly, in an atomic era which has bounced radar off the moon, one in which the United States Navy has spent millions of dollars and man-hours upon the designing of a practical station in space.

Science fiction too technical? Not really. It may take a string of engineering degrees to design an artificial satellite—but it doesn't take a Ph.D. or any other diploma to enjoy reading about one.

Science fiction is escape reading—what form of fiction is not? But it is also a fear-therapy and sadly needed coordinator between the ephemeral world of high science that so permeates our everyday living with its endless gadgetry and the multitude of people to whom science is a lot of meaningless figures.

Science fiction does a lot more and does it both painlessly and entertainingly. For one thing it offers hope for an A-bomb conscious humanity, hope through the ultimate achievements of the scientists whose work has in many cases been so sadly misused by humanity.

For another, it is filling hundreds of thousands of bright young men and women with enthusiasm for scientific study, carrying them through drudgery by its presentation of imaginary goals. If the kids can understand it it's not so tough.

—The Publisher.

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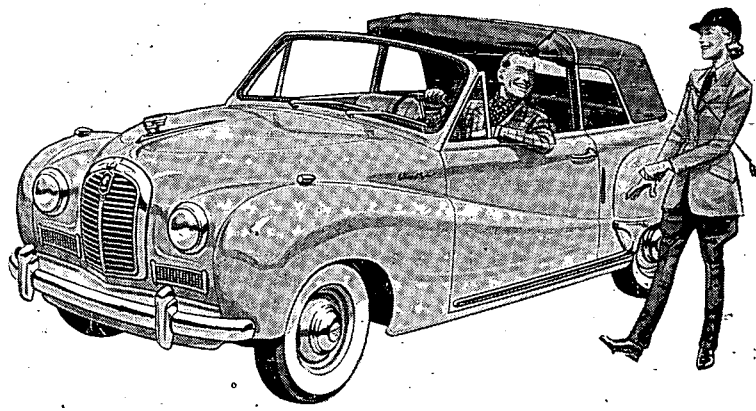
# Austin announces a new convertible—



**This new AUSTIN A-40 "Coupé de Ville" Convertible** has a 3-position top that's truly continental. It cruises along at 65, cuts your operating expenses up to 50%, and delivers a good 35 miles per gallon! Underneath its smart exterior, you'll find a steel body that's extra tough. The price is the "pay off"! Only $1945 f. o. b. coastal port of entry including $250 worth of "free" extras and all Federal taxes.

**AUSTIN OF ENGLAND**

**For more information write:**
**27-29 West 57th Street**
**New York, New York or**
**600 Gough Street**
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